

Indian Literature

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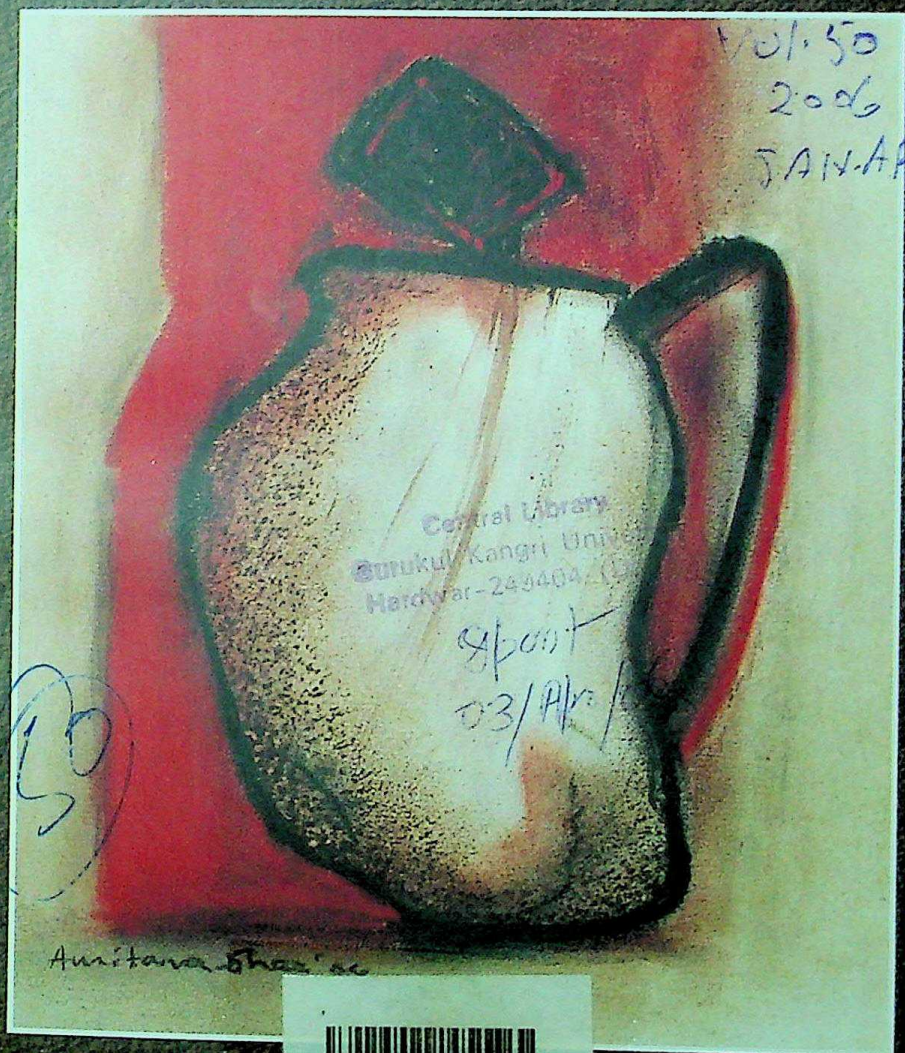
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Indian Literature

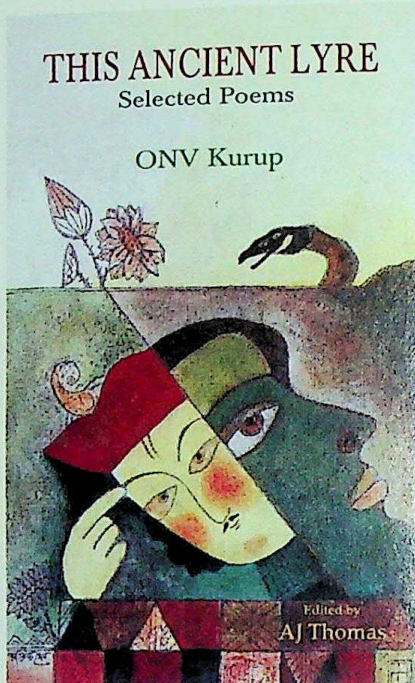
SAHITYA AKADEMI'S BI-MONTHLY JOURNAL



131630

HIGHLIGHTS:

Birth Centenary Tribute: Syed Sajjad Zaheer
Jatra Text of Assam and Orissa
Folksongs of Orissa



This Ancient Lyre
by ONV Kurup

Anyone who attempts to delve deep into the poetry of ONV Kurup will encounter this truth: the inspired poet, sustained by his great compassion and humaneness, captures beauty through choicest words and offers deep philosophic insights. The poet always strives to empower poetry, enabling it to attend to the spiritual needs of the succeeding generations of sensitive souls. For this, he takes special care to ensure that each of his poems is an inquiry into new realms of aesthetic experience. ONV (as he is referred to affectionately by poetry-lovers) does not even for a moment forget that his commitment, first and foremost, is to the aesthetic aspect of poetry. If it has to fulfill its various other functions, it has to be perfect in form and content in the first place. Word-music, harmonious rhythmic patterns and brimming poetic truth set ONV's poetry apart.

Edited by A.J. Thomas this volume contains poems culled from the poet's 23 collections, translated by various hands over the last several decades, presenting the bewildering variety of his oeuvre.

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Phone 23745297, 23364207 Fax 091 011-23364207

E-Mail : sahityaakademisales@vsnl.net

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FROM THE EDITOR'S DESK

For once, we are not beginning an issue in a mourning mode. In 2005 Indian literature itself was as if in the throes of death. Apart from many others, we lost as many as six stalwarts beginning with O.V. Vijayan, and then continuing with C.D. Narasimhaiya, Ramachandra Sharma and K.V. Subbana during the summer and in the colder months Amrita Pritam and Nirmal Verma, bringing up the rear.

Here we are, then, opening an issue with the celebration of a birth centenary—that of Sajjad Zaheer, the pioneer of the Progressive Movement in Indian literature. In the article we publish, K. Satchidanandan argues, “To remember Sajjad Zaheer today is not merely an act of homage to a visionary who was a poet, fiction writer, playwright, scholar, orator, organiser, journalist, critic, essayist, lawyer, historian, patriot and revolutionary, but to recall a whole movement that had challenged the conventions and mores of status-quoist art and literature and sought to transform them into effective and beautiful tools for the subversion of canons and transformation of life.” He remembers Faiz Ahmed Faiz’s beautiful requiem for Sajjad Zaheer, ‘the Wise Man of the Tavern’, that ends in the exhortation, “Blow out the candle and bid adieu/ Drink up your liquor and smash the cup.”

After a rather longish lapse, we bring back the section ‘Kinsfolk from Far and Near’, where occasionally we focus a visiting writer from abroad. Steven Grieco, an Italian-American poet and translator who writes in English and Italian, visited India last November and gave a reading of his poetry, mostly poems were from his then unpublished English collection titled *Interrupted Path*. His other volume of Italian poetry, *Golden Masks*, is available in English translation. Presently working on a project of translating Ghalib’s ghazals into Italian, Grieco believes that listening to poetry is a much better exercise than reading it. When we hear poetry reading, we hear something ringing beyond words; and it is in this ringing sound that the meaning is enclosed. We publish here some of the poems presented by him for reading, though.

Jatra, a powerful medium of folk entertainment, is prevalent in Assam, Bengal, Eastern Bihar and Orissa. It is generally believed that this popular genre of folk-theatre first originated in Bengal and later spread in the neighbouring areas, though Kapila Vatsyayan, an expert

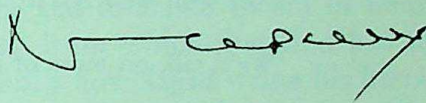
in the field, thinks that the origin point is rather hazy and proclaiming any clear verdict may be counter-productive. However A.B. Keith in his seminal study *Sanskrit Drama* seems to be clear in his perception that *Gita Govinda* is at the root of 'Krishna Jatra', widely performed in Orissa as part of an annual religious festival. M.L. Varadpande, another authority on Indian theatre, opines that historically, the Jatra as a dramatic form owes its existence to the Krishna Bhakti cult of Bengal. In the article 'The Origin of Oriya Jatra', Hemanta Kumar Das analyses all the pieces of available evidence together and concludes that Jatra was a part of the rich and ancient cultural tradition of Orissa and its first rudimentary appearance can be traced back to the 1st century B.C. Hence, there is no reason why it should be treated as a parallel creation of Bengali Jatra which originated much later, during the advent of Sri Chaitanya.

We dwell on Orissa a little longer. From folk-theatre to the folk-songs of some of the tribes of Orissa. The songs, the tales and the oral traditions of different tribes of India were long looked upon as rather inconsequential ethnological data. However, slowly there is a growing realization that they are highly precious materials throwing light both on the traits of individual personality and the value-system of the society. They are equally valuable source material as literature. In the section 'Folk-songs of Orissa' Lipipuspa Nayak brings together a few randomly selected folk-songs of Juanga and Gond tribes of Orissa. They have 'rich literariness about them, and the lines often follow a distinct rhyming pattern with plenty of musical alliteration, they seem to ask the reader/ listener to join in the celebration of life: "The fact of being alive itself is a great boon and we should, till life lasts, partake of it."

In a brilliant analysis of early English translations of Kabir in the piece 'Translating Bhakti: Versions of Kabir in Colonial/ Early Nationalist Period', Akshaya Kumar shows how the first translation (1877) by Ernst Trumpp, was purely "an intellectual exercise as the translator does not evince the requisite empathy" with the text, while in the second translation (1909) by Max Arthur Macauliffe, there is a political shift: "unlike most of the translations undertaken and accomplished under the Orientalist project, the present work is thrown open to native criticism and its possible approval." According to Akshaya Kumar, Tagore's translation of Kabir's poems is the first major translation of the saint-poet exclusively (all earlier translations were as part of the *Adi Granth*). "It is major because it is the first exclusive endeavour of translating Kabir, more as a poet than as a mere religious reformer."

It is also major in terms of its reception. Coming close on the heels of Tagore's Nobel Prize fame, it received an immediate international limelight." Thus with Tagore, Kabir also went international!

English is no longer a monolithic language. Even if we do not claim Englishes of America, Africa, Asia or Australia wholly different languages, one has to admit that they are different 'Englishes'. The Americans have for long been calling their language 'American'. Are they different dialects of English then? But calling them dialect is problematic, since the notion of dialects brings with it the requirement of a standard, a super-ordinate variety—"a language that lords over the others and has much wider functional range than the rest, apart from being the most prestigious of them." Braj B. Kachru analyses the whole issue in his new book *Asian Englishes Beyond the Canon* which Amiya Dev comprehensively reviews in this issue. Kachru claims that all these global Englishes have become standards in their own geographical domain and beyond and are vying with the primordial English English in terms of prestige and recognition. Dev refutes this claim and argues that "Evidence of only one register is not strong enough to obliterate the institutionalization of other, 'formal' registers."



Nirmal Kanti Bhattacharjee
Editor

BIRTH CENTENARY TRIBUTE

Syed Sajjad Zaheer*

K. Satchidanandan

*Na ab ham Sath Sair-e-gul Kareng
Na ab milkar Sar-e-maqtal chalenge*

We'll roam no more in the valley of roses
Nor sit side by side under the shade of the gallows
Gloomy twilights will not catch us in our frenzied
search in the Desert
Nor shall we stroll in the sunshine along boulevards
of lovely women
We'll talk no more of those we loved—the ravishers
of hearts,
Nor write of our agony with our blood....

Faiz Ahmed Faiz's requiem for Sajjad Zaheer, 'the Wise Man of the Tavern', that ends in the exhortation. "Blow out the candle and bid adieu, Drink up your liquor and smash the cups" (...*Pio, our peeke saghar tod dalo*) is today not only a tribute to a comrade, but invokes a whole bygone age of fertile friendships, spirited polemics and of a young literature fighting for social justice and a new radical aesthetics of resistance against oppressive hegemonies of every kind. To remember Sajjad Zaheer today is not merely an act of homage to a visionary who was a poet, fiction writer, playwright, scholar, orator, organiser, journalist, critic, essayist, lawyer, historian, patriot and revolutionary, but to recall a whole Movement that had challenged the conventions and mores of status-quoist art and literature and sought to transform them into effective and beautiful tools for the subversion of canons and transformation of life. The story of Sajjad Zaheer is the exciting story of the transition, first of a boy growing up in the lap of luxury

* Address made on the occasion of the Sajjad Zaheer Birth Centenary International Seminar, New Delhi, in Decemeber 2005

provided by a rich and influential family into a Leftist intellectual at Oxford and then into a grassroots worker among the Indian masses and the champion of the Progressive Movement who would not mind going underground hunted by the police in Pakistan or getting arrested many times in India. Those who remember Sajjad Zaheer – Bunney or Banna Bhai to his friends – recall his verve, sincerity, selflessness, humility, readiness to sacrifice, his ability to create lasting relationships and his democratic spirit that was always ready to respect people of opposing views while never flinching from his own strong convictions. His English prose was as excellent as his Urdu prose and he used his verbal skills to the maximum, by penning short stories, plays, articles, critical essays, novels, travelogues and of course, poetry, though he had little time left to him after his conferences, mushairas and organizational jobs, to devote to serious writing.

Mulk Raj Anand extols Sajjad's humanist vision and his almost saintly devotion to the ideal of social transformation. Anand says how Sajjad was preoccupied with the synthesis of Indian and European cultures and the problems relating to the great political and philosophical schools of Western Europe in their effect on contemporary Indian thought. The fundamental problem of our age, to him, was to restore to the people their cultural heritage and to create an era of human development beyond the pre-history from which mankind had just begun to emerge. Ali Sardar Jafri recalls how Sajjad wrote his literary memoirs, *Roshnai* (Ink) and his great book on Hafiz Shirazi, *Zikr-e-Hafiz* in the trying circumstances of the prison in Baluchistan. He remembers their friendly circle that included several major writers – from Buddhadev Bose, Bishnu Dey, Sudhindranath Dutta and Mulk Raj Anand to Saadat Hasan Manto, Krishan Chander, K.A. Abbas, Ismat Chughtai, Majaz, Majrooh Sultanpuri, Kaifi Azmi, Josh Malihabadi, Miraji and Akhtar-ul-Iman. Sajjad knew French and his discussions invoked Rimbaud, Mallarmé and Baudelaire along with Kafka and Picasso and the classical writers like Ghalib, Mir, Tulsidas and Kabir. He did not agree with the ideal of pure poetry and wrote a critique of the French Decadents titled *Sher-e-Mahaz* (Pure Poetry). Sardar Jafri quotes Lenin to celebrate Sajjad Zaheer: "Man's dearest possession is life and since it is given to him to live but once, he must so live as not to be scared with the shame of a cowardly and trivial past, so live as not to be tortured for years without purpose, so live that dying he can say : *All my life and my strength were given to the first cause in the world—the liberation of mankind.*" Ismat Chughtai calls Sajjad Zaheer "the Prince of Dreams", a soldier who used to fight with the help of petal wands rather than muskets and cannons." He could never

K. Satchidanandan / 9

hurt even his intellectual foes; his presence played a key-role in keeping people together and making them forget their mutual ill-will and grievances. There was a blend of realism and romance in his temperament: a princely charm combined with an apostolic brightness.

Sajjad always tried to convince others that he had done nothing in his insignificant life, but the anthology of short stories he had edited, *Angaare* (Sparks) that carried five of his own stories had really sparked off a new flame in that genre by interrogating the traditionalists and provoking the status-quo; his novelette, *London ki Ek Raat* (A Night in London) with its search for a purpose in life has a unique place in Urdu fiction, his play *Beemar* (The Sick) seeks a social solution to individual problems and his prose-poems collected in *Pighla Neelam* (Melted Sapphire) have a silent depth to them as in poems like *Honton Se Kam* (Less from the Lips); he could also use traditional forms proficiently as in *Phool* (A Flower) or *Taaziyat* (Condolence). He upheld hope in hopeless times. He reminds us at times of Mayakovsky: "Our eternal loneliness is going to end, at last:/ We have kissed the forehead of Venus/And embraced the Moon;/From the towers of Mars/We hear no more/The drum-beats of War/But the distant strains of/Flute and tambour." ("The New Year") He has even a picture of Mayakovsky ("Proud and erect/Head held high/Eyes looking at the distant far/Bare Head/Even in this cold/His coat-buttons open") in *Three in Moscow*. Even in desolate wilderness, he feels the lurking scent of remembrance ("Ruined Garden"); he interprets Hamlets' soliloquy 'to be or not to be' in our political context ("To Be or Not to Be"). He most feared the day when "The golden bonds of love/Might break/Like dry twigs;/Eyes open and close/But might not speak/Hands work/Fingers write/All about everything/But, forget, Somehow/To support the tottering steps of/Little children." Sajjad Zaheer's letters from prison, especially those addressed to his wife Razia written from Central Jail, Lucknow, and to his daughter Najma from the District Jail in Quetta, Baluchistan are moving records of his solitude as well as his love and concern while his articles on Nehru, Lenin, Iqbal, Ghalib and others show his deep understanding of men and letters.

Even while doubtlessly upholding the profound social message of the Progressive Writers' Union and also the Afro-Asian Writers' Movement in both of which he was deeply involved, Sajjad Zaheer was also conscious of the potential pitfalls of such movements. He was especially, almost prophetically, wary of sectarianism and dogmatism, two evils that were later to afflict the Progressive Movement in India. He was always aware of the artistic aspect of creativity: "To be well-equipped with knowledge and with one's cultural heritage; to have

hope and faith in the future of mankind, to be intensely human; to have the courage and skill to discover the reality sometimes hidden behind manifold pretensions; to have the courage to speak the truth and tear the veil of lies and hypocrisies from the face of life – all this and much more is required of a writer. But above all what is needed is the supreme capacity to change and transform his own discernment of objective reality, the truth, the fact, into something more and higher than reality; into an object of illumination and beauty; the objective reality, the knowledge and the passion transmitted through the crucibles of creative endeavour into a new aesthetic reality.” He keenly observed the changing patterns of knowledge and evolving technologies around him; he wanted writers to understand psychology, to better explore the inner world of man; he asked them to deal with the most mundane issues, but never to forget the larger existential issues that confront man as a species. He was not against learning from poets like Whitman, Lorca, Mayakovsky, Louis Aragon, Paul Eluard, Rimbaud, Rilke and T.S. Eliot and from fiction writers like Dickens, Chekhov, Gorki, Joyce, Proust, Kafka, Hemingway, Faulkner, Sartre and Camus; he believed, like Brecht, that our writers should pursue new styles, but they should also stand firmly on the Indian soil, articulate our own national and cultural experience and life and struggle against all that is trivial, negative and anti-human in Western literature.

Sajjad Zaheer defines the ‘progressive outlook’ in broad terms: “A progressive outlook means precisely the kind of comprehensive and dynamic outlook which takes the totality of the many-sidedness of life and reality into consideration, which is capable of seeing both that might be bad and vicious and powerful, but also the new, the dynamic, the good and the necessary which ultimately will overthrow and destroy that which negates the law of social development.” He was very upset that some comrades had begun to denounce Tagore and even Mulk Raj Anand and K.A. Abbas; he did not want writers to be judged by their empirical class background and the ideas they professed, but by their writing – very much like Lenin, who while answering Plekhanov’s critique of Tolstoy as a Christian aristocrat, upheld the great writer’s texts as the ‘mirror of the Russian Revolution.’

Sajjad Zaheer criticises too the tendency among some progressives “to consider that only such writing is progressive, which is politically motivated, which has a political theme or which is revolutionary in a political sense.” He does not deny their importance, “but surely the full development of human personality, the enrichment and refinement of his sensibility and soul, requires, as part of his entire life’s activities, an incessant effort to create and appreciate beauty and harmony, the

hearing of the lover's sweet and sad music, the eye for colour and design, the discovery of the hidden, mysterious and wonderful recesses of the human heart, face to face with the glory of sublime nature or life in its ever new and manifold manifestations." He found no dichotomy between the two; the greatest artists combined these qualities.

He repeatedly upheld the artist's freedom once he accepts the broad humanist base of all art and would not mind philosophical and ideological differences and differences of method and style among broadly committed artists. He called for the "unity of all democratically minded writers." Not dogmatism and bigotry and exclusion, but free expression and exchange of ideas, liberality, tolerance and mutual respect and regard should be our slogans. He was for flexibility within the organisation, freedom within creation and tolerance of creative differences. As Ibrahim Alkazi says of him, "Sajjad Zaheer had the strength that is acquired through patience, through self-questioning, through contemplation and through long years of solitude spent in prison and in exile away from his homeland, away from his family. He never knew rancour or envy and when he suffered, he did so quietly, without heroics. His suffering and vicissitudes did not harden him. They did not coarsen his fibre or embitter his spirits. On the contrary, they made him more aware of the pain and suffering of others."

These lessons Sajjad taught, I believe, are all the more valid today, even more than three decades after his demise. A lot of blood has flowed under the bridge; imperialism has taken on new hues and subtler shapes difficult to identify; war, terrorism and violence on the basis of class, race, caste and gender, besides ecological violence, have grown beyond all proportions; globalisation is out to undo native cultures, perceptions and worldviews; the socialist movement has suffered serious set-backs from within and without; the nations upheld as examples of socialist triumph have mostly collapsed or have been forced into various degrees of compromise with the enemies of egalitarianism and democracy; India is striving to survive between fiercely opposite pulls and progressive and radical aesthetic theory has undergone many transformations and subtle subversions as well as expansions in the hands of Althusser, Roland Barthes, Fredric Jameson, Habermas, Raymond Williams, Terry Eagleton, Pierre Macherey, Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault, Baudrillard, Richard Rorty and others besides feminists, Black theorists and the spokesmen of sexual difference. This is the context in which we are to reassess the contributions of Sajjad Zaheer and to consider the present and future of the Progressive Literary Movement in India. □

Ashis Sanyal

For Love's Sake

We stood staring at each other
till from the forest
the white darkness came out to greet us.

Far away the waterfalls thundered on.

Standing in front of the crystal stream
I saw the spread of a dream
on the silken wings of the blue birds.

Then suddenly
a flock of blood-red darkness
flew out in the sky
and stood motionless.
The brown tree
cried out in terror.
That was the lone protest
of an ice-cold night

Walking through the silent deserted fields
a lover fiddled with his lover's image
on his finger for the last time
and gave a terrible laugh.
The trembling voice of a deer-calf
shrieked out stories of some bygone ravages.

A shivering disbelief
trapped me from all sides
lashed my voice

and placed an enormous stone
in my heart.

I tried to scream.
But only tears rolled down from my eyes
till today for my love.

Translated from Bengali by Neeta Sen Samarth

Now Tathagata

If we were to meet again
on the way to Hastinapur
on a fine winter morn
would she then clasp me close
and ask: Are you happy now?
Did you find the happiness you hoped to find?
What will I answer then?
Once this woman had come close,
and emptied the riches of her heart.
But I left her in the dark,
and went far away in search of divine bliss

From Magadh to Ambar
I travelled to a distant, endless, dark void.
I have seen many rivers since then
with beds bright like diamonds.
Rivers which were much too cold
with ice blocking their hearts like an ailment.
Some were frivolous and frisky
and enticing.
But I never found
the satin smooth honey of your heart
nor tasted your womanly nectar.

Translated from Bengali by Neeta Sen Samarth

A Historic Darkness

Once more I walk on in darkness.

On either side
lie barren fields.
And nearby the river coils like a python.
Lashing at my very existence
sneering at me
scattered pieces of dead butterfly wings.

This darkness is a known darkness.
It has nurtured my very being
from the womb,
sustained and brazened it
through war, epidemics and revolutions.

The same darkness
has again seeped right down to my conscience.
The stories of all ravished capitals
of the past
are reflecting in my soul.
And in it too
can be heard the heart-rending cries
of those proud mothers
who wept on their way to Hastinapur.

I sustain all these in my heart
and walk along
in this same silent historic darkness.

Translated from Bengali by Neeta Sen Samarth

No Allegiance

I don't owe allegiance to any one.
So, at ease can I leave
the camp on the fringe

and drift towards my wistful haven.
Wherever I fancy
without dithering can I rove
shearing off the barriers of animus
removing the filth and waste
on a road inaccessible.

Allegiance is as steely as shackle.
It holds you in bondage
turns you a voiceless derelict.
Life tends to lose
the zest of life
and the pleasure of all prime longings.

I don't owe allegiance to any one.
So, at ease can I anchor—
anywhere is my sojourn.
At any dreamland euphoria
crushing the sweepings around me
with a mortal flow
I can animate, fearless and brave
an indomitable yearning for awakening
in the depth of my mind-within.

Translated from Bengali by Surabhi Banerjee

Dnyaneshwar Mulay

I Have Not Slept

I have not slept after that night
I saw on the small screen
that a prominent Minister
was inaugurating a tall barrier
I have never heard walls having opening ceremony
In that case they should call it closing ceremony
It closes the possibility of being anything
doing anything anywhere
It closes our lives to ourselves

I could not sleep after that night
Felt as if somebody was
chopping me into two parts:
Arab part and Jewish
Felt as if I am being rejected
right under my nose
And dialogue of existence
is being intercepted
because the wall of security
is more relevant than life itself

That night I could not sleep
In fact nights after that night
I could not sleep
Because the walls prevent my
veins carrying blood to my arteries

Words have now deserted
while describing the walls

The map of land and space
has been altered

Now remove those murals of doves
and paint the city afresh with vultures all over

I have lost my sleep altogether
The walls are sprouting everywhere
Millions are being invested in
separating man from man
So many machines and so many bricks—
everything being deployed to divide

Where is my sleep friend
Within minutes the land is being snatched

Olive farms are being uprooted
Approach roads are being blocked
Normal life is an exception now
Sleep has disappeared
nowhere to be seen

Apples from Golan

This is the story of a hill
everybody calls it Golan
It's a Syrian hill
though not fully Syrian anymore

This is the Golan this side
That is the Golan that side
In between are barbed wires and landmines
In between are hopes and disappointments
And of course the disengagement observers

This is the story of a hill—
full of natural springs and orchards
People know it as Golan for centuries
Full of olive trees and cherry blossoms
bright oranges and red apples

Everybody calls it Golan
It's sweet soil is like kolushkor*
and water like nectar
In the middle rolls the mesh of barbed wire
Even birds do not dare cross
without the permission of the watchtowers

However a new wind is blowing
bringing with it tonnes of apples
The first apples in forty-seven years
across the barbed wires
If not people, at least apples
are crossing

The news says:
fifteen thousand tonnes are coming
There is agreement on all sides
The trucks are loading

I want to see these apples
I welcome them
and embrace them
I want to witness the smile of each of
those apples
when they cross over like a breeze
the barbed wires and landmines
and greet me here.
This is the story of Golan
and the beloved apples.

The Violent Fingers

In the city of Sadr
fingers are violet
Elections in the air
Not bullet but ballot

* Kolushkor is a Syrian sweet with pistachio inside

While colonies are being bombed
people have courage
In the smoke of exploding bombs
they walk to the voting booth
Sometimes in their wheelchairs
on their way out
they dip their fingers in violet ink

In Sadr city
the fingers are violet
and mood romantic
as the votes are cast
for building a new life

Everybody has a violet finger here
as everybody has voted

The headlines are made
by suicide bombers and car explosions
Next morning there are new headlines
of more explosions and deaths

But violet fingers
lead the way to a new constitution
to a new caravan
on possibly a new journey
of infinite dreams



Esther Syiem

U Lymboit U Lymbiang¹

I was a discarded one, a social non-being,
terribly ashamed of my nakedness—
weak and translucent I was—
so I kept myself hidden in nooks and crevices
so damp, so cold, so dark—
until
they who volunteered to go
but who came back,
who only knew how to do
the self-defeating strut
found me out, and
reached for me, and
pushed me unwillingly
to the forefront of their history
to plead for them
from she, who had turned away,
and extinguished her light
in the cave²
She, who was the giver of life

1. U Lymboit U Lymbiang—the rooster. Lymboit lymbiang literally means naked—originally he did not possess feathers. The rooster has always been used as an oracle.
2. The cave—The *Krem Lamet Latang* cave where the sun hid herself when she found the creatures of the earth mired in wrongdoing. All creatures gathered together to ask for volunteers who would bring the sun out again. Several went but all came back unsuccessful because of an overweening sense of pride. Finally, a *lymboit lymbiang* was sent to plead for them. He came back successful. For this, he was given feathers to clothe himself with.

she pitied my shivering nakedness,
and granted them the freedom once again,
to live in sunlit dimensions.

But I am weary, weary,
I can no longer call up the answers for them.
For they have betrayed yet once again
and they cut me up
cut me up
cut me up
to read my entrails
to predict a future for their own convenience.

This rigmarole repeats itself. For
I have unwittingly exchanged
my nakedness for
these feathers that have been
implanted from
the moulting breed of their kind.

My Sacred Groves³

My sacred groves
must lead somewhere
for they call me to them.
And as I plot them out
in my mind's eye
I see them thickly dotting
the barren landscape
of my father's childhood.
And I ask of them:
Who knows what you know?
Who knows what you see?
Who knows what you hear,
what the eagle and the crow tell?

3. These sacred groves still remain undisturbed in places like Sohra, Mawphlang and Nongkrem.

Who knows?
For the seekers
have come and gone
and you keep
your secrets from them.
My sacred groves
were given me by my father
and they now live
within me; compelled
beyond enchantment.

All about *U Pyrthat*⁴

Once when the earth was young
and the forest tender,
were gathered creatures
numbering thirty or more
who formed part of a gathering
all poised to take part
in a dance that had never been.

The earth which hosted this unfurling of talent
was witness to the slow jiving movements
of the owl deeply stirred
by the fluted calls of *i shakyllia*⁵
The drumbeats of the squirrel
matched the musical showers
of the porcupine's bells
in an arena of brightness
where all came to exhibit
a display of talent,
its wealth never seen before.

There was music and dance
and singing camaraderie,

4. *U pyrthat*— the thunder

5. *i shakyllia*—a small bird with a melodious call which may be heard over a great distance.

*ka dngiem*⁶ shuffled by
 with womanly grace—
 slow step by slow step
 the earth she scratched
 as demure as a belle
 at her first dance.
 The revelry was fired with
 laughter and merriment
 and the field rat's face
 was fused with the moment.
 His eyes are now slits
 of mirth uncontained.

On that significant morn
 when all else paused
 for a ringside view
 of creatures in dance,
U pyrthat who had come
 to take stock of the others
 took note of *u kui*⁷
 who brandished a sword.
 He desired what he saw,
 to pirouette agilely,
 to flash it around
 in a masquerade of power.
Ukui in good faith
 lent his baton of steel
 and the sword changed hands
 in transient goodwill.

U pyrthat struck discord
 with his gleaming talisman
 and destroyed the merriment,

-
6. At the great dance hosted by the earth, the lynx had a sword which he brandished about and which the thunder envied. He asked to borrow it, but then took it away with him to his abode in the heavens. Ever since then, whenever there is lightning it is believed to be the thunder brandishing his sword. It is also believed that the lynx vainly tries to get his sword back by depositing his dung in the same spot everyday in the hope of using it as a *ladder* to reach the thunder.

7. *u kui*—the lynx

the laughter and delight.
 He stole from the circle
 and leapt away and beyond
 the awestruck creatures
 who were frozen in silence
 to gawk what didn't register at first
 that *U pyrthat* had pre-empted
 with the force of his conquest,
 and broke up a revelry
 the first of its kind.

The glint of the steel
 and the flash of the sword
 can never be sheathed now
 as unreason held sway
 and snatched it away.

u kui in the meanwhile,
 demolished and defeated,
 was prey to the thoughts
 that stoked him again
 to recover his pride
 and to set back the time
 to the grand finale
 which was
 to be his alone.

2

So to the dung that he makes,
 he must add another mass
 to enable him to use
 as stepladder to the heavens
 to reach for his sword
 before the pyramid starts crumbling.
 A tragically vain effort
 to obtain a possession.

The emboldened *pyrthat* in his heavenly abode
 wields his weapon in flashes of *leilieh*⁸.

8. *leilieh*— lightning

He makes mockery of *u kui*
and his show of bravado;
he intimidates all
by his wonted attempts
to press down his claims
as star of the show.

In moments nostalgic
he relives his conquest
in the roll of his voice
and the flash of his steel
and to all earthly creatures
who hear him again
they repeat oft this story,
the text of his victory.

Pahsyntiew⁹

Forlorn ancestress.
As a child I believed in you.
As a young woman
I wished to uphold you
as my personal myth.
As of now,
I wish to preserve you
as a source of inspiration.

Shrewd historians
float theories about you;
and though you have been weighed
and found wanting,
I still chose to look upon you

9. Pahsyntiew— She was believed to have been a woman of divine origin who sought refuge at the Krem Marai (Marai Caves at Nongkrem, a few kilometres away from Shillong). It is said that a man from the Myllemngap clan used a *jalyngkteng* flower to tempt her out, and brought her out of her shelter. He then brought her up and married her off to a warrior from Nongjri. The Syiem clan of Shillong is supposed to have descended from her. Khasi society being matrilineal, traces its lineage from the mother.

as the source of my identity
from a distant time.

I have learnt to admire you
as you were wooed
to procreate a generation of rulers,
consecrated too, by such as you.
But perhaps you were all too human
for the past has caught up with them
and they too court *u khun u hajar*¹⁰
with yellowed flowers.

Is this your vengeance
upon those
who foisted themselves upon you
and wooed you
with a yellow *jalyngkteng* flower?

10. *U Khun u hajar* r-- citizens of the state.

Jaba M. Gupta

Leaving India

Coming away from the Old World
leaving behind memories—
concepts, notions, and friends
books that were dear, too dear to carry,
ground realities and flights of fancy

sailing into an unknown, azure world
gliding, spreading wings
slightly rusted, slightly bent, with care
weighed down by myths
of belongingness, comfort, freedom.
Suspended in liminal space
the world is a mystery again
but one thing is certain:
there is no turning back in time.
The only path lies ahead
winding out of sight
just the bend showing
nothing beyond
like slides appearing one by one
on an overlapping screen.

Should I hold my breath
for the next step?
Is there something to wait for?
A tomorrow within today and yesterday?
I seek answers in a panacea of silence
among people content to take every
moment as it comes;

I am alive in God's vibrant world
evolving with it in a sea of
faces glowing like flowers
painted on with human hands.

In Search of a Story

In search of a story
I allow myself to wander
with the fog
hovering over San Francisco's houses
growing out of the hills—
dribbling down the window panes
floating like the missing birds
over the blue expanse of the ocean:
unseen.
Seeking a story that will be mine,
like nothing that has gone before.

It is always there
in the shadow every time I look back.
But the darkness is comforting today:
hidden from prying eyes
I am alone with my memories.
There was a house somewhere far away
where I was a child
in ruins now...
I have often told myself.

Even if it does exist, nothing is the same—
the world has moved on,
things have changed
as have I.
The beloved faces no longer await
my return — or call out;
the gates are barred,
great rusty locks hang heavily down
and I have lost my keys.

The years have flown:
this is another time and space—
being now is not the same
as being then.
Yet as I float
in the arms of the fog
over the golden city
of dreams and more dreams
I find myself foundering on my way
across time looking into dead windows.

Vigil

Today it is
a different world I see
a different 'I'
on vigil
in another time

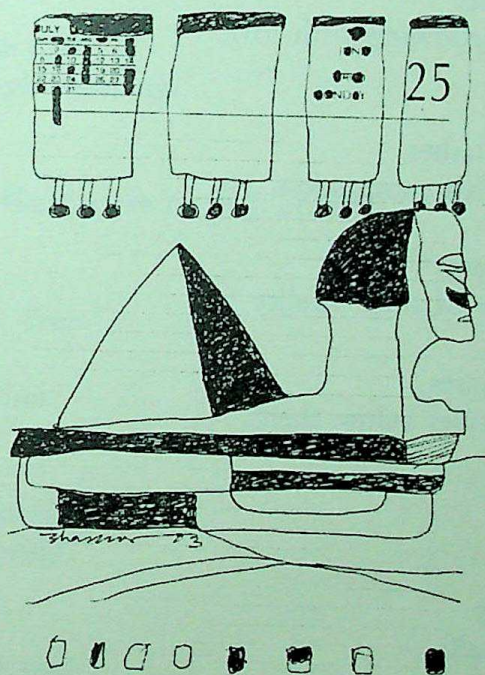
and space
in search of a friend
among unknown faces
strange resonant voices
and polite smiles
in search of
a fusion of alien horizons
blending of discordant notes
in search of
symmetry in a maze
of tomorrows and yesterdays
barging into todays
sure as the path of a supersonic jet
searing through the clouds

Author's Note: I have been writing poetry since my early teens. Through poetry I attempt to express my philosophical and experiential interest in transition, changing horizons, shifting identities, temporal conversations, and uprootedness and alienation in immigrant life. Having lived and worked in the multi-lingual and multi-cultural society of India often provides me with

intriguing perspectives on the ethnically diverse society of San Francisco, where I now live.

I first conceived the poem "Leaving India" on the plane during the long flight from India to New York. My mind was in a mixed state of excitement: a feeling of nostalgia for the life left behind, hope for the future, and apprehension about what lay ahead! Hence the reference to liminality—a "betwixt and between" stage. However, the poem took on a final shape later when I had taken the time to absorb the world around me, a vista of new images, mysterious and inviting at the same time.

The second poem, "In Search of a Story,"¹ was written on a very foggy San Francisco evening when I was really trying to write a story, but the fog outside the window panes distracted me and I let my thoughts wander. That poem and the third, "Vigil," try to capture diasporic experience, working from my own circumstances outward to other transnational people's situations. Those who are caught between cultures and nations find it hardest to tell their stories, because they are neither here nor there. Having left their home countries, they no longer belong as they once did, though they continue to be plagued by nostalgia; on the other hand, it will take generations of birth before they feel perfectly at home in their adopted countries.



L. Thomaskutty

Within Vision

Look,
your eyes
are slowly turning smaller,
losing their sheen
and blue radiance.
They are now like rough rocks.
Your deep
meditative eyes once
were soft and overflowing with love.

Your eyes
fringed with fine lashes
were brimming with compassion.
Now
self-wrought sorrows
have robbed them of their vitality.
Now
unwarranted anxieties
paint dark half-circles below them.

Swollen
scum-filled
defects of vision.
Concealed anxiety
on the cataract walls.

Touching the winnowing fan
and the pillar
and the trunk and the tail,

description of the elephant....
Will the hemmed in eyes
grow smaller and smaller
in anger and grief
and turn ultimately into
mere dark dots?

The transparent incandescence
paraded by the seasons...
The myriad colours
showered by the heart...
are all turning away?

For the eyes to be sharp
shake up the base
keep up the effort
and let your inner-space overflow
never leaving the well-springs
to dry up.

When the eye
really becomes the eye
vision gains multiple meanings.

Translated from Malayalam by A.J.Thomas

The Vision of a Tree

Do not leave the inn
It is death
that comes on
drenched in the dancing rain
and trumpeting shrilly.

The yellow light
that suddenly goes out
The strangers
who talk in hushed tones
And the tree-branch

L. Thomas Kutty / 33

that snaps and fall.
The laughter in the aboriginal tongue
that waxes
in the table's candlelight--
even when all these smother you,
pretend not to see the black robe
that's inching towards you....

Didn't the old innkeeper
already say
that the inn was an ancient one?
And, not to leave the inn
even if the brazier went out
and the roof itself shook?

The black robe
is trailing you too.
Rain and cold
are lying in wait.
It is the debts you owe
to the dead, and their tears
that shatter on the crown of your head
and spread.

The blanket of the dead one
is not for you.
The lap to lull you to sleep on
is the grimy benches placed alongside
and tattered gunny-bags.
Do not leave the inn
At whatever cost
wait till the rain stops.

Your fare here
are the sneeze-like local speech
and the searing
love-songs.
Your chum, the tick
When the gramophone offers
entertainments and fun

in a disembodied form
enjoy it, don't move.

Isn't it raining
outside?
Isn't it the river
that rushes along madly dancing?

It is the tree
that comes down foaming in the rain
and avenging itself.

Has sitting bolt-upright like this for ages
turned your muscles
into mist?
Were it the pillars that
laughed in the aboriginal tongue?

Is it that
you are not
at all afraid of rain now?

Let the rain subside
before deciding on anything.
Don't leave the inn, yet!

Translated from Malayalam by A.J.Thomas



Manish Chakravarty

Emancipation

I

Say whatever you'd like to say
(do whatever you'd like to do)
lots and lots of men
expatiate heresies and hearsays
and do many everyday.
But I won't say anything
nor would I do even a thing :
I'd like only to drop down
in cloudbursts
from dark ominous clouds
that gather gradually
from the deep seas
creeping upwards like reptiles
from Kanyakumari
thro' Eastern and Western Ghats
and the Indo-Gangetic plain
upto the huge, colossal Himalayas
becoming those long-lost dinosaurs.

Much have you all said
since the days of yore,
Harappa, Mahenjodaro
and all those edicts on rock,
prehistoric historic
Ayodhya, Kurukshetra
of those revered epics

building up unforgettable
heritage and traditions
that spell thro'
syllable after syllable
Vedic hymns that soar
to become Omkar
the eternal music
of the spheres.

I would, however,
say nothing either,
nor would I do a single thing.
I won't even like to
quote scriptures
to resuscitate heritage
and traditions like dinosaurs
that have embraced oblivion
hundreds of ages ago.

II

What's the use of
resurrecting a robust past
in a famished, polluted world
of degenerated, degraded demons
satiated with hyperboles
breeding diseased mammons
that decompose lively greenery?

We dream of making
a world free of pollution,
of sapling that sprout
in soils
poisoned
with fertilizers and insecticides :
we dream of saving
the world from annihilation
thro' healthy test-tube chromosomes
in labyrinths of DNA RNA

germinating muscular physique
to envelop pernicious clique
of perverted intentions.

III

What's the use of
purifying the environment
creating lush greenery
to sustain homo-termites
eating up homo-sapiens
attempting benediction?

What use
nurturing health with nutrition
developing brains
for Machiavellian manipulations?

Flowers that bloom
on poisons injected
thro' sinuous gloom
lure lurid crew
like Adam's apple
inducing original Sin.

IV

The Holy Grail
that streamed in the firmament
to save the fallen race
have left no trail
for us to circumvent
the Arthurian pen.

We have no great apes
to bring Vishalyakarani
that resuscitates
corrupt carrion.

Those of us who remember
 tales heard from granny—
 tales prehistoric of Purander
 conquering fort after fort:
 tales of churning ocean
 bubbling up *halahal*
 that threatened to corrode
 the entire terrestrial sphere.
 But lo! granny assured
 there was the perennial Shiva

to drink up the gall:
 and to bequeath nectar
 for emancipation
 of homo sapiens that endured
 the incantation *amrutasya putra*.
 And then there were
 tales of blood from Golgotha
 that streamed in the firmament
 tho' God was nailed to the cross.
 Promethean chains on Caucasus
 betrayed the celestial wrath.

All these were annals of old,
 anecdotes of Cyclopean dimension
 in the Victorian days of gold.
 Now the puny present diminution
 have ended all magnitude
 in obesity and corpulence
 devoid of rectitude
 or saving grace.

V

Now the time has come
 for wholesale extirpation
 out of festering pollution :
 would all our *satis verborum*
 save us from annihilation
 in this our new millennium?

□

Manohar Bandopadhyay

What Happens Next?

Jaundiced images
trapped in paraplegic shadows
Sounds tinkering over worn out words.
Staple of thought hangs
on requiem for meaning
the patience has run out
to reach the soul.
The flame is breathless in the rotten air.
Kinetic language flirts
with chaos of show-world.
Do not look for epic
the poem is grappling for life.
Much rubbed metaphor reduced to dust.
The world bows to hype.
The scourge is on all sides of the tide.
Bear with it and watch
What happens next?

Migration

What use biting your lips now
you can't just pull back.
You will famish
in the retracted landscape too.

Deep down the tangle
you spun for yourself
bartering the bucolic joys.

You run short of time
and time is shorter for you.

Now make sure
you ride through safe and survive.
What is your real ground
you never know.
Setting your eye
from mirage to mirage
for an implacable prize
is a tough trial, you may stand or fall.

Hibernation

The silent shadow meditates
over the midnight glass.
The blank page gives out
a bleary epileptic stare.
The much-tended pen lies
Comatose upon the breast of paper
The voice spins and fails
The choked throat wouldn't give the way.
The table and the shadow and the glass
and the pen and the paper
all fall short of the uneasy stir.

Faces

The village junked into town
the souls of the town now live in cities.
Tossed from place to place
you have known countless faces.
The faces too dear once are lost forever.
The faces age but not the images.
A few familiar looks that stroll
before your eyes seem strange
and the new ones alien.
The benign nature has put you off lonely
preparing for the voyage of a lonely traveller.



Meena T.Pillai

Elegy Written in an Electric Crematorium

Life

A long deadening of senses.

First the skin

Layers and layers of sensuous touch

Peeled away

Leaving the bones bleached and dry.

Then the words

Strangled, pickled and bottled away

Their taste altered

By the no longer sensing lips

Then the turmoiled flow of tears

On parched eyes

Become lost memories

Then the heart droops,

Withers, shrinks and dies.

Looking in the mirror

I see no embers

Not even ashes enough to scatter in the wind:

Just the wisp of a long sigh.



Ranjita Nayak

History

A little part of life
vanishes with each moment that passes
The present dies among the ruins of the past.
I wonder why through childhood
I dreaded history;
the images of the past
glowing through the dark like cats' eyes.

Life is held captive by desire.
Turning the page, there spills over
disaster; pillage, torment, revolution
civilizations' rise and fall
and in lamentation you cross
rivers of blood.

In the old witch's spells
the young prince riding on his winged horse
in the magic forest is turned to stone; and all his legions
are struck forever mute by time.

The moss-covered inscriptions on the walls of caves;
the crippled dancers in the hollows of temples, fallen,
writhe like some moth trapped in a spider's web
In the agony of being exiled from time,
pausing to throw fistfuls of darkness
into the depths of light.

On the river's swells there floats
long, lustrous locks of hair sealed in a casket

Through tearful eyes, the life that is past peeps forth
and from within the abandoned sunset, the life that is left
searches for the designs of tomorrow.

Translated from Oriya by Chandan Das

Come, Let Us Depart

Having planted the seeds of dreams
in the furrow of darkness,
what purpose is there in waiting? It is late now,
come, let us depart.

Do you think you can transform
the barrenness of stone
with the tinkle of your anklets?
That a desert watered by tears and remorse
can become a lush valley? Impossible.

Tell me truly,
has your being never trembled
in murdering the tender saplings of countless dreams?
In burying alive your pride,
has it never faltered for an instant?
Has life never confronted you with its questions?
Tell me truly.

After all this,
why linger in this desolation?
It is late now,
come, let us depart.

Translated from Oriya by Chandan Das

The First Lesson

Abhishek Kashyap

I lived in a nondescript, sleepy and backward town called Bishunpur. The school — Government Middle & High School Bishunpur of which I was a student — was situated at a distance of nearly half a mile from my muhalla. This was the first and the last school of my life. I studied here from class one to ten.

The building of this school wore a prehistoric look not, only internally but externally as well. I used to pass all my hours here from ten a.m. to four p.m. seated on a half-broken bench in a dilapidated room.

I was then a student of the third standard. I attended my school in shorts and shirt — old and tattered — and I stuffed all my books and exercise books in an aluminium box. I was a backbencher. I would place my box on the front table called desk and, pleased with myself, I would draw lines on my hands or write my name in Hindi and English in different styles on the exercise books. I cherished the dream of learning all languages of the world including Bengali, Urdu and Persian and signing in those languages.

All other boys of my class too were very much like me. They too were dressed in rags and had running noses. They would while away their time playing various games like hide-and-seek, *Ice-Pice* and *Chhuwa-chhuyi*.

The teachers seldom cared to enter my class or any other classes, for that matter. There was a corridor beyond my classroom, at the end of which was a room having a large square table surrounded by a dozen chairs. They called it the Teachers' Room. Sitting at this table all our teachers would read newspapers, gossip, discuss about the soaring prices or national and international politics, or doze off.

Even if a teacher entered a class casually, the boys simply did not

care to take any notice. The teacher too, equally callous, would write something on the blackboard with chalk-pencils and settle down comfortably on the chair with his eyes shut. After sometime we could hear him snoring. At the end of the period, some boy would awaken him and he would amble off, rubbing his eyes.

Thus our days passed comfortably, for we did not interfere with each other, as we were pleased with our respective worlds.

But the school peon called Bahadur had strong work ethics. He would ring the bell for each period without fail on time. He was a Nepali with a snub nose and fair complexion. He talked to all boys cheerfully addressing them as "Babu". He was extremely popular with all the students but I liked him the most when he rang the bell for the tiffin break or a holiday. All boys would come out of their respective classes making terrible noises.

When bored by drawing lines or writing my name, I tended to be artistic. I would take out of my bag the chalk sticks pinched from the Teachers' Room and begin to draw on my desk various pictures—a tribal woman fresh from the well or a tank, a blooming rose in the pond, a goat tied to a peg in front of a hut and a snake moving fast from a hill across a path. The desk came alive with these things. I had heard those days that God created this universe. I wondered how he must have felt after completing this creation consisting of a myriad of men, animals, beasts, insects, mountains, waterfalls, rivers, natural water courses, jungles, oceans, fields and granaries. But I would go into ecstasy after I had created this little world of mine. I used to be really intoxicated with pride and self-confidence after my creation so much so that I cried aloud.

Bahadur would toll the bell for the tiffin break exactly at quarter to one. The boys would rush out of their rooms raising a din that fell and rose. Boys with their tiffin would scatter around the field, squat on the ground and eat their meal. Those whose houses were in close vicinity of the school would go home for lunch. The boys who don't carry their tiffin would make a dash to the vendors selling chaats, pakauras, lemon drops and ice cream. They really looked like swarms of bees as they thronged the vendors.

I would leave my bench comfortably only when all students had walked out of the classrooms. I would take out of my box the small glass and the tiffin box I had brought from home. As I came out I would

cast a wistful glance upon the world I had created. Looking at it I would take leave of the world of my creation.

Coming out of the school I would fill my glass with water from the running tap and choose a corner on the flights of the steps. I would crouch down quietly. The moment I opened my box my mother's face haunted my eyes. The delectable smell of the paranthas, roasted potatoes and mango pickle which was mixed with the tart fragrance of mustard, cumin seed powder and coriander would, spell an airy circle around me. As I helped myself with the food my heart used to be filled with a deep sense of tenderness for my mother. Each morsel made me feel her touch. A deep sense of well-being would pervade my body, which was nothing but a gift of my mother.

I would cast a cautious and clever glance upon the creation on the desk after the tiffin, lest I should lose sight of it. I wondered if God was equally jealous about His creation.

I don't know why I maintained a distance from my schoolmates. Was it my craftiness or something else? There was only one boy, Kanu, with whom I would strike up a conversation once in a blue moon. He was extremely outspoken and fearless.

One day during the tiffin break he asked me if I was interested in tasting some plum. "It would be really a treat," said he.

I accompanied him instantly without caring to ponder over his proposal. Kanu took me behind the school full of tangled thickets of brambles. As we waded through them we were confronted by many wonders and surprises. I was face to face with the world that I used to create on my desk.

At first I saw a hovel in front of which there was a goat tied to a peg. Then I saw a tribal woman across the distant track. She was carrying a pitcher on her head while coming back from the tank. There lay ahead a pond with a lotus flower in full bloom.

Shaken by a deep surprise I was advancing speedily when I spotted a black serpent descending from the hill ahead. It ran near our feet and disappeared in the wild shrubberies that grew around the pond. To me it was the eighth wonder of the world.

I felt like running to my desk and asking, "Arrey! Why did you escape from here?" And if I found them all there I would ejaculate, "So, you have succeeded in reaching here before me!"

Looking back with a jerk I found that the school was now totally invisible. I had left behind the entire panorama of the hut, the woman returning from the pond, the pond with the blooming lotus and the hillock.

There lay in front of us innumerable hillocks small and medium in size over-grown with oak, peepul and sisam trees besides the wild shrubberies. The whole atmosphere was so enlivened with the warbling of the birds that it appeared that it would set on a long flight.

To me it was an entirely novel world opened by my friend Kanu.

"We are about to reach the fiends' house shortly. Very frightening indeed," Kanu remarked breaking the long, painful silence.

"The fiends' house? What do you mean? Is it really inhabited by any ghost?" I began to tremble.

"No, no. Not at all. It is a fiends' house only in name. It is far away from the town and human society. That is the reason why people brand it a fiends' house." Kanu started recollecting something by twisting his mouth. "The boy who brought me first here told me that it belonged to some British officer. The sahib's white wife killed him one day in order to elope with her Indian lover. Since then the spirit of the poor Englishman has been haunting this bungalow. It kills any one who dares to step into this house. But this is all a cock-and-bull story. I ventured into this house several times all alone. I searched every nook and corner of the bungalow but never did I have any encounter with a spirit. Of course I get the chance of witnessing a movie occasionally. That too, free of cost, if you please! You too will witness one if you happen to be lucky."

"What do you mean?" I was taken aback at his harangue. He was like this always. Either he would monopolize the silence or else would go on and on.

Kanu had now fallen silent.

"But you had promised to treat me to plums!"

"Oh, you will get plums and all. Only accompany me, Baba!" He felt piqued.

We went past bushes and jungles and mounted an earthen mound. We were face to face with the "fiends' house." The bungalow was constructed in a novel style. After crossing the small main gate made up of iron we could see a square lawn surrounded by brick walls, which were now covered with wild shrubbery. Inside the main gate the path was covered with gravel, which led straight to a platform. One could see the verandah after that.

The external look of the bungalow made us believe that it was inhabited by no soul. The yellow distemper unable to stand the vagaries of the treacherous rains had faded into colourlessness.

Kanu opened the gate with confidence; entered the campus and asked me to come in.

I followed him meekly but felt terribly frightened. My heart was pounding beyond my ribs but I refrained from uttering a word. I had no courage to face Kanu's temper.

We proceeded along the right side of the bungalow and reached the rear part. There we found a big wild plum tree near many rooms looking like outhouses meant for the servants.

The ground was strewn with so many plums that it was unnecessary to pluck them by climbing the tree or hurl stones for the fruit.

We were busy stuffing the pockets of our shirt and trousers but failed to pick up all of them. We filled our palms with more ripe fruits and proceeded to the front of the platform munching our find.

The humid wind coming from inside began to assail our nostrils. It was indeed a familiar smell and it was invading my consciousness after a long time.

We ascended the platform that was piled with dry leaves and grass. The vacant space was inscribed upon, with chalks and broken pieces of bricks. Some naughty boys had written names like Gudiya, Soni, Neha, Timple and so on. Some of them had painted pictures of paan leaves penetrated with an arrow, a symbol of their love, while others had established a relationship with the girls' private parts. The anonymous writers had used incredibly obscene swear words.

Kanu entered the veranda on tiptoe like a shrewd wild cat and beckoned to me inside without caring to look in my direction. For a moment I trembled badly. I felt as if I was going to enter a frightful, large and dark tunnel from which there was no going back to school or to my mother. And yet I went on seized by an indefinable spell.

The verandah was covered with a thick layer of dust. There was a clutter of some bricks, stones, feathers of birds and...broken nests. I noticed a pair of sky-windows with smashed panes. Birds had built their nests in them. The yellow sun through the ventilators falling on the floor dispelled that dust-coloured darkness. There was a front door that was the only way leading to the inner darkness and mysteries of the bungalow. And whatever my eyes saw suddenly was simply unprecedented. It had opened a window of primeval mystery in my life.

Abhishek Kashyap / 49

After that day, similar images had begun to peep through the inner corners of darkness in me, in my dreams.

Standing at the border of the verandah, that is, the inner door, we both were about to enter the house when we were startled by something like the sound of footsteps. It obstructed our movements. We realized that it was not a sound of footsteps but a moan. Inside the house, two shadows were trembling in the darkness. As the mischievous yellow sun leaping from the sky window fell on the floor it exposed a dark-complexioned face. The long locks of the hair were being daubed in the dust around the floor. The eyes seemed lost in the dream of an infinite ecstasy. The round breasts were shaking. A face was leaning upon the rest of the body. A sudden shove and thrust and the whole body began to shake violently. The earthen lamp-like eyes attached to the dark complexioned face appeared to be put out. A shriek-like sound emanated from the lips and the head jerked so violently that it felled the locks of hair on the ground making them look like black cobras crawling about. The invading teeth held the lips in a tight grip. All was a blissful silence after that.

I heard the heaving of a deep, cold sigh.

I found my feet trembling. My eyes were wide open with shock. I felt like bursting into a loud shriek but I had lost my voice and my whole body was frozen. I stared into Kanu's face, helpless. He was smiling and there was a sparkle of mischief in his eye.

Holding my hand Kanu dragged me to the platform hurriedly. Then he whispered in my ears, "Run, boy, run!!!" He showed me a clean pair of heels without caring to wait for me. I lost no time and followed him.

As I ran I wondered how my body frozen like snow could afford so much of stamina. We kept on running till we reached the rear part of the school. On my way back I had no sense to notice the sight I cherished so dearly—the thatched hut, the goat tethered to a post nearby, the woman returning from the pond and the blossoming lotus in the tank. I would have been decidedly bothered had the black serpent coming down from the hill confronted me. In that case I would have fallen on the ground in a fit never to rise again. The Lord God did not let this happen. I thanked the Lord whom I could not see with my naked eye but who did exist, for enabling me to come back to my world safe and sound. We had arrived at the school and very shortly

I would return to my house too where my dear mother must be awaiting me. I consoled myself with the idea.

After five minutes when the speed of my breathing that went on like a bellows returned to normal, Kanu gave me a shameless smile. "How I had promised you a show free of cost!"

I kept on staring at him like a perfect simpleton. He then let out a loud guffaw at the sight of my facial expression. After that he patted me on my back and asked, "I trust you enjoyed yourself, didn't you, beta?"

That day had introduced me to an amazing world. Probably all get such an introduction sometime in their lives.

Kanu used to hold sway in the class. He would occupy the front benches with swagger along with his ruffian chums. Occasionally he would sit by me on the backbench leaving his circle. But he would indulge in mischief anywhere and everywhere. It was taken for granted that he was fast asleep when he was out of mischief. All the schoolmasters were mortally afraid of him, for he was extremely blunt and outspoken besides being daring. He was like this because he was a victim of his circumstances.

Kanu lost his father who was a rickshaw-puller four years ago. His mother, after toiling breakneck for years, had succeeded in setting up a grocery shop. The business picked up and provided mother and son with enough to pull on.

Kanu was the only child of his mother. He had turned into a devil without the disciplining by a father and with too much pampering by his mother. He had nearly a score of ruffian friends who kept on stirring up trouble after occupying the five front benches.

Once Radhey Shyam Master, after being plagued beyond endurance, had thrashed him for some reason. It was an event in our school, for no teacher, to the best of our knowledge, had ever touched any student.

In the evening Kanu waylaid Radhey Shyam Master in the market along with his trusted ruffians.

"Take the *dhoti* of this daughter-sleeper off and let it fly in the market!" Kanu snorted. "He sleeps with his own daughter. This night I am going to take the skin back off this motherfucker's ass," he declared to his chums.

The poor Radhey Shyam Master fell on his feet and cried bitterly in the market place in the presence of hundreds of people.

Since that day no teacher had the guts to pick any quarrel with Kanu. He attended and left classes at his own sweet will.

Some chicken-hearted teachers like Radhey Shyam made sure that Kanu was asleep before they had the courage to enter the class. They got in only after having peeped through the window and finding him dozing off. The rest of the teachers too tried their best to keep Kanu in good humour.

There was only one teacher in the school, Rampareekha, who was very close to Kanu. On my way back from the school I had seen Rampareekha Master Sahib treat the fellow to chaat-pakaura, ice-cream and chocolates. One day when I had been to the market for buying some sugar I noticed Rampareekha Master Sahib standing there and drinking tea. Nearby, Kanu was sitting and eating hot jalebis. My mouth began to water.

I began to envy Kanu for his good luck. Instead of bringing tiffin from home he used to bring money. At tiffin break he would rush to the vendor's and eat heaps of chaat-pakauras. One day, Kanu paraded to me a twenty-rupee note and then putting his hand around my neck proceeded to the vendors. I was offered a cream roll and a cup of ice cream. I had never bought the cream roll or ice-cream, for these items were too expensive although I sometimes did buy chocolates, *jeerabatti* pills, *chaat-pakauras* and appetizers.

While enjoying the ice-cream it occurred to me that Kanu must have pinched the money out of his mother's cash, for he never brought more than two to four rupees to the school.

"How could you manage to lay your hands upon so much money?" I gave Kanu a glance of suspicious curiosity.

"That *sala*, Rampareekha offered this!" he replied casually. After finishing his cake he was busy sweeping his hands.

I had a shock of amazement. Normally Kanu never mentioned any teacher's name without the usual honorific like *sala*, *chutia* and *barammi*. But it was really amazing that he should behave with scant regard for a teacher who was so fond of him and who gave him treats frequently. I considered him to be ungrateful.

"If you want, the bloody fool of a Rampareekha can favour you too with some money," said Kanu caressing my head as if eager to give me some consolation.

"How come!" I grew somewhat sad unable to forget the taste of the cream roll and the ice-cream.

The following day Rampareekha Master Sahib called me after the assembly. I was overjoyed at the bright prospect. After all, Kanu was true to his words.

He handed over to me plenty of chocolate bars and asked me

to see him in the Teachers' Room after the school hours. He was smiling in a strange manner. I shuddered at the sight of his bulky body in wretched dhoti and kurta, his golden smile and the oil-soaked hair that was unkempt. But I was unable to resist the temptation of so many chocolates.

After he entered the Teachers' Room I was seized by a sudden urge to show Kanu the chocolates and convey him the glad tidings. I ransacked the entire school but there was no trace of Kanu.

Kanu had missed school that day.

After hearing the school bell go, I got up and began to take care of my bag as usual. As I proceeded to the Teachers' Room there was no soul left in the school except Bahadur. I had spotted him outside the Teachers' Room.

"So late Babuji!" Bahadur gave his habitually innocent smile.

"Yes, I am wanted by Rampareekha Master Sahib." I looked at the tube well pump from which water was falling drop by drop.

"I too am on way to the market in order to fetch *paan* for Master Sahib." Bahadur went his own way.

Rampareekha Master Sahib was seated at the other end of the large table. He was skipping the pages of a newspaper restlessly. I noticed an unfailing expression of gaiety on his face.

"Come along, come along!" he grinned exposing his yellow, repulsive teeth.

When I followed him he made me sit on the chair close to him. He rose from his chair and began to peep outside. After a few minutes he resumed his seat and fished out of his dirty shirt a twenty-rupee note and passed it on to me. An indefinable fear seized my soul. I pocketed the note with my trembling hand. He kept on smiling. He caught hold of my hand and seated me in his lap with a jerk.

A terrible storm began to rage in my being.

His hands were caressing my head. He planted a kiss on my cheeks. I felt like vomiting as I was assailed by a strong stink of his bad breath. He then caught hold of my hand and pushed it under his waist. My hand was touching something hot and solid like iron. The stuff was rising and trembling.

I was tending to be cold as ice. I suddenly recollected the scene at the "fiends' house." It was the ultimate moment. Decisive and clear. I gathered all my strength and yelled. I yelled so powerfully that it frightened even Rampareekha Master Sahib. He loosened his grip and began to tremble. I was now running with all the strength my feet could muster.

"Wait, wait." I heard a voice that was very feeble, frightened and trembling. But I refused to wait. I went on running till I left the school, the field, the rows of trees, the road, the market and every thing else behind me.

"Wait, wait." The trembling voice was still haunting me.

"You *sala* Rampareekh! You daughter-slee..." I was uttering the language of Kanu.

I halted a bit panting miserably. I took out of my pocket the note; tore it into pieces and flung it in the air. It was, probably, not the age to compromise. Or, was it in my nature?

I remembered my mother painfully and intensely. I hurried to my house.

That day I had learnt in my first and the last school the most valuable lesson of my life.

Translated from Hindi by Uday Bhanu Pandey

Two Days From Phantom's Diary

Arupa Patangia Kalita

Last night was extremely hot, but in the early morning there was a light shower. It cooled down the temperature. The passengers in the early morning bus were all dozing. Suddenly the brakes were applied, followed by a screeching sound jolting the passengers as if they were water inside a closed vessel. There was no time for them to grasp the situation. Already four young boys, from among the passengers, were brandishing their guns. One was pointing the gun at the driver, the second positioned himself near the door and the other two were threatening the passengers. Being soaked in the drizzle, the jeans worn by the boys which never saw water emanated a nauseating odour. It was the Friday bus that carried passengers comprising traders from the small town to the capital a hundred kilometres away in order to bring merchandise. Just within five minutes, the boys extorted a fat sum of money. They approached the bespectacled man. He had one thousand rupees which he handed them without the least protest. The boy grabbed the money like a kite. The man experienced a pain in his heart. How much could he have accomplished with this sum! The boy stank making the man feel like vomiting. "Give whatever else you have," demanded the boy in a rough tone. The man laid down his specs and closed his eyes, losing himself in his own world of fantasy. It was thick darkness, only layers and layers of thick darkness....

The slightly built man felt a strange power flowing through his veins. With extreme swiftness he seemed to tug the stained collar of the boy and growled like a tiger, "Miscreants! Gang of criminals, making effort to earn is tedious, in the name of rescuing the nation you are extorting easy money." The other boy extorting money in the rear of the bus came pointing his gun. The man inflicted a severe blow and he fell face down. As if touching a spiteful object, the man pushed

the gun with his foot. Then like a cat charging at a mouse he bumped the heads of the two boys and left them unconscious. Like doves struck by pellets from a shotgun they remained on the ground. The other two who came near the man also received severe blows which made them fall down. The man dragged all four of them to the centre of the bus and shouted, "Miscreants, gang of criminals, sucking the blood of men has become an obsession." He spat on the face of one of them....

When he opened his eyes, the bus was moving. The passengers suddenly became aware that they will have to go to the Police Station. It seemed they were pushed from the tiger's mouth to the lion's jaw. The bus stopped. The passengers alighted. The man also got down. When the driver and the handyman came back after taking tea, they found the bus deserted. They decided to go to the Police Station and return.

The man boarded a different bus. At least he escaped from the harassment of the gang. The bus jerked a lot. That particular part of the road was devastated by flood three years back. Flood came, dried up, but the road remained the same. The bus swayed once right, once left. The bus was jam-packed with passengers stacked like betel leaves. The man could not move his foot. Initially when he started his career in the small town which was 30 kms from the highway, it took him half an hour to forty five minutes to cover the distance. After twenty years it took now two to three hours. The whole road was scattered with big potholes. It was extremely hot inside the swaying bus that moved at snail's pace. A man was trying to make room for a woman—who was covering her mouth with a hand and making an awful sound—in order to allow her to be near the window. The passengers seemed like crystals of sugar kept inside a container. A baby was crying at its highest decibel as the belt of someone's bag got stuck round his neck. An old lady was rebuking the boy standing next to her in the harshest words as he treaded upon her toes. The woman making the awful sound threw up. The stinking vomit soaked the shirt of the man standing near. Scorching heat, commotion, stinking vomit, severe pain from the immobilized foot. The man shut his eyes.... Layers and layers of darkness enveloped his consciousness. His distress and agony was immersed in the darkness. Amidst the darkness a pen was glowing like the fire from the will-o'-the-wisp. He picked up the pen and started writing for the national dailies. Emphatic language, fluent English, intense reflection. What caption to be given? It was the crucial time for king-making, so who would give ear to the condition of the ramshackle roads of a state like ours? *The Bananas are Devoured by*

the Bats would be a suitable caption. The bananas devoured by the bats would come up for discussion in the Rajya Sabha. His report would be published, there would be editorials on the fatal portion of the road. The Central Government would question the State Government, files would be probed, the mismanagement of loans sanctioned by the World Bank would come to light, newspaper headlines... Investigations...public wrath. The road would be repaired on a war footing.

The bus was really moving at a steady pace. It reached the highway. He changed into a clean shirt and put the soiled one in the bag. A cup of tea refreshed him.

Arriving at Guwahati, the man hesitated to get down from the bus, since wherever he tried to step in, it was soggy. As soon as he stepped down he found his foot in the pulpy mud. The entire bus-stand was ploughed by buses. Perhaps there had been a heavy shower last night. Most of the roads were covered with red soil sliding down the hills and making them muddy. By the time he reached his aunt's house, after completing his office chores, he looked like a man coming from the paddy field, being covered all over in red mud. The compound of his aunt's house was immersed in knee-deep water. Wading through the water he found that the house was also waterlogged. His aunt was preparing dinner, placing the gas stove on a bed. Seeing him, his aunt started moaning, "Oh! Where will you sit? What will you eat? I cannot even offer a cup of tea in this house." Uncle died quite sometime back, aunt brought up her son single-handed managing the village property until he was employed in Guwahati. She sold the village property and purchased a plot in Guwahati complying with her son's wish. The house was built and a daughter-in-law was brought in. It was her time to enjoy but instead she was crying. The man attempted to lighten the situation by humouring her, "It is only a trickle of water, why should you cry?" His aunt had toiled quite hard in her life but he never saw her shedding tears. "I am not scared of water, but this is not water: a slight drizzle is enough to bring all hell inside my house." Some more water carrying a lot of garbage entered the house. Lumps of excreta, a rotten crow—the man felt nauseous. Aunt served him a cup of tea and two rotis. "This is the type of danger that we fail to confront," aunt's face bore clear signs of dejection. He could not swallow; something choked him. He reclined towards the wall sitting on the bed raised by bricks. The eyes were drooping shut. Darkness was spreading like sand. He seemed to be rolling in the sands of darkness. There was darkness in his eyes, his whole being was enveloped

in darkness, even to the roots of his nails.... He had become the editor of a newspaper. There was growing public opinion against digging of hills, with a photo of his aunt splashed in the front page. His aunt who had struggled throughout her life and won in the process was now declaring that she was a failure in contending with the danger of mud immersing her house. There was a mass rebellion led by his paper. The tilling of hills was stopped and the hills were mended. Sitting in the verandah aunt was enjoying the falling of rain. The flower plants like roses, *ashokas* and *togors* brought from her village were sprouting beautifully instead of perishing in the flood. Even the smile of the aunt was printed in the front page of the newspaper. There were no piles of red mud sliding down the hills due to the shower as the hills were covered with green foliage....

"Eat, eat this," aunt served some food in a dish. Taking a handful to his mouth he put it back; a foul odour like that of raw fish emanated. He got ready to depart. Folding his pants he got down from the bed and saw some sprigs getting stuck to the verandah. They were kept piled near the dustbin for some time, now the water had brought them in. He came out through the garbage.

When he boarded the homeward evening bus he felt an itching in his legs. Would his hands and legs turn like that of aunt's who had patches of scars all over? His legs went on itching. There was some space in the evening bus due to the slackness of passengers, allowing him to stretch his legs. Crossing the highway, the bus entered the dilapidated portion of the road. After covering the distance the bus came to a halt. It would proceed no further. The bridge ahead had a hole. All people got down from the bus. The roadside shopkeeper passed the information. Two mini-buses, a few taxis and a couple of rickshaws together ferried passengers to and fro. The man, along with another four booked a taxi. They started crossing the bridge on foot and saw that a piece of iron sheet had come off from the centre of the bridge.

"These bridges are from the time of the British; how long will they last after all?" This statement was made by Jeevan Saikia, the Head Clerk who worked in the tea estate two kilometres away from the small town.

"Has your garden received the letter from the British Government?" asked Nabin Sharma, a pharmacist working in another tea estate.

"All fourteen tea estates have received it," remarked another senior clerk who worked in a garden a little further from Sharma's.

"I don't understand what letter from the British Government

you are talking about," said the man who was cautiously crossing the broken bridge.

All of them sat in the car. The car started bouncing through the potholes in the road. Once again the man asked, "What letter were you talking of?"

Nabin Sharma replied, "The British Government has informed that the bridges they constructed for communication while establishing the fourteen tea estates in the area have crossed the prescribed period of their durability. They have urged strongly to rebuild the bridges."

"Sharma! Do you have a copy of the letter in your office?" asked the man eagerly.

"Why not? There is," all of them replied in unison. The man reclined in his car seat. The breeze was blowing through the lowered windowpanes. The heated body was gradually cooling down. The eyelids were becoming heavy. The car reached the portion of the road damaged by the flood. The car being small, jolted the passengers as if they were carried up and down by the waves of flood. The heavy eyelids invited darkness, thick like velvet; soft darkness enveloped his face. The darkness spread out to form an enchanting carpet that carried him instantly to some distant place.

He was leading a small group to Delhi with the letter in his hand. He had been able to knock at the right places. The British Government's duty-consciousness was being compared with the indifference of the Indian Government and a copy of the letter was printed in the newspapers. He returned from Delhi after extracting a hefty amount as grant. Work was progressing on a war footing, bridges were reconstructed. The public were regarding him a hero, there were press conferences, T.V., Radio, all were eulogizing him.

It was past ten by the time he reached home. The children were asleep. His wife was waiting. No current; a lamp was lit. She quietly took his soiled dress to soak in the bathroom and arranged water, towels and sandals for him near the bathroom. He entered his feet carefully into his sandals as the straps were on the verge of being torn. But he found his feet encased in sturdy straps. His wife suppressed a smile and lowered the lamp to his feet, a new pair of sandals with blue straps shone in the darkness. The man rubbed his hair and asked, "What is this?" She answered quietly as she wanted desperately to spend sometime alone with her husband without awakening any of the children. With a gesture she asked whether he would take dinner then or later. The man also answered in a hushed tone, "Not just now, feeling tired, so let us sit for sometime." Actually he felt like having a cup of tea

but did not want to send her to the kitchen. Wearing the new sandals he went slowly to the back verandah. Before sitting down he placed a stool near him. The woman came out with a cup of tea. She sat on the stool near and stared at the jaded face of her husband. It was only a single day, yet she felt as if she was sitting near her husband after a long time. The man ran his fingers through her tresses, the slippery hair came off her loosely tied bun, it covered her face like the light cloud covering the moon. In the pale moonlight he went on staring at her enchanting face. "Why did you purchase the sandals? I told you to buy clothes."

"Yes, I bought my clothes, dresses for the children, and also your sandals."

"So many things you purchased. After all, how much money did you have?"

"Do we buy things like you? We buy only after carefully checking and bargaining....I forgot to tell you something, I have plucked the coconuts from the newly planted tree, the kernel is so white. Tomorrow I will make *laddus*...And another thing...today at noon while I was cooking lunch the papaya tree bent down, why will it not bend? The papayas are so big, I gave it a prop, tomorrow you fix it properly..."

"Hazarika!" The neighbour Sarma called. The man immediately rose.

"Today we have guard duty." This had been going on for the last one year. The military had started this, though not daily but weekly once they checked the record, no chance for deceiving. If somebody yawned at office they asked one another, "Did you have guard duty?" Telling Hazarika that he would follow soon, he told his wife, "Serve my dinner." Finishing dinner he asked, "Is there any letter for me today?"

"Yes, I had forgotten, a boy delivered a letter."

"Anybody familiar?"

"No, wait, I'll fetch the letter."

He opened the letter. An A K 47 seemed to come out of the letter. It seemed to bump into him heavily and then demanded. "Give Rs 50,000, or else...." The second bump made him roll down.

"From where can I give Rs. 50,000? I have to worry even to buy a pair of *hawai* sandals."

"You must give, if you don't...." The gun came up again; before hardly a sound could be heard, he rolled down in pools of blood. He fell down on the roadside stones like the boss of their office, Mr Saikia.

Like Saikia..., his feet too turned yellow after bleeding profusely. His wife stuck her head to his yellow feet. The man felt his head spinning. Saikia was heavily insured, his elder son was a doctor, the younger had the requisite qualification for being employed in the office; he owned his house and even had a house to rent out. But what did he own? He wanted to fold the letter and keep it aside but was unable to do so as if it was a letter bomb that blasted in the centre of his house; his beloved house, children, wife, all turned into debris; someone covering the mouth carried the lumps of flesh in a cart. The man was unnerved.

The wife yawned as she was sleepy.

"Whose letter?" asked the wife yawning again.

"Ah ! It is an official letter; you go to sleep. I shall lock the house from outside and open again myself." He went outside. After going a few paces he again read the letter under the streetlight. Checking the date he realized they wanted to meet him the next day; he saw that the name of the place was completely unfamiliar. Even after working for seventeen years he had not heard the name of that place. After all he would have to go, again he visualized the sight of soles turning yellow after profuse bleeding; the enchanting face of a senseless woman were pressed to those soles. Saikia had held a high post, had connections with the police, the military and politicians. What happened? Everything remained as it was. He decided to go the next day as he will have to go. He glanced at his house, the bedroom light was on, his wife was still awake, if he had vigilance duty, she could not sleep.

Sarma, Dowerah, Hazarika, all three came in his direction. Dowerah once handed them Rs.10,000— borrowed money— and made an agreement for another ten thousand, even borrowed two thousand from him. During Dowerah's time even if it came to the knowledge of police and army, there was no problem; everything passed off smoothly, there were even rumours that money was shared. It came out in newspapers and then these new dangers cropped up. Recently, Chandan Saikia was arrested from the office itself. A quiet man, yet his crime was that he paid money to the terrorists. One arrested terrorist had a list of names who paid money and Saikia's name figured in it. Police, army, legal proceedings, all joined hands in harassing the man. Even now the case was pending. Though he thought of sharing the news of the letter yet he stopped short of it, being unsure of the outcome.

All of them used their sticks to strike at light posts, telephone posts, gates of residences while loitering for sometime. Then they

stopped near the riverbank, afraid to step on the bridge for fear that they might not see the holes in the dark.

A heap of stones lay there, brought either to repair the road or to fill up the potholes on the edges of the bridge. They sat on the pile of stones. The calm breeze comforted their bodies. Two army vehicles passed them. Gradually, the night deepened. Large mosquitoes surrounded them. The river bank was covered with jungle. The man suggested, "Let us sit in Dowerah's house and have a cup of tea." At other times also they took tea sitting in someone's house. While they were sipping tea sitting in Dowerah's verandah, two army vehicles halted near the bridge. Previously also a couple of army vehicles came but not so frequently. It was 14th August, many terrorist organizations had declared a *bandh* next day. Everywhere violence was rampant. Perhaps due to this, army vehicles were seen more frequently. Seeing none near the bridge the military men came arrogantly towards them. They started abusing them severely for relaxing and sipping tea instead of guarding the area. The man wanted to say something but suddenly something choked him. In a split second a slap resounded on his cheek followed by abusive slander, "All of you are supporters of terrorists, helping them to blow up the bridge." Spreading a strong odour of liquor they marched to their jeep.

The men again came near the bridge. The vehicles tore through the darkness. Striking mosquitoes with one hand, Dowerah murmured, "Why should they slap us, we are not their bonded slaves!" The man who was slapped, dozed off sitting on the heap of stones. Pressed by tiredness he went on swaying. The man jumped into the enchanting darkness which shrouded his consciousness.... Gradually, he immersed himself in the whirlpool of darkness; darkness penetrated his ears and nose. With a gulping sound he drank darkness—his parched throat drank it. In the darkness he once went up, once down. He emerged from the darkness with a strange power flowing through his veins. He protested, "Are we bonded slaves? Why will you slap me? Who are you to interfere with my human rights?" Facing a raised gun, he snatched a pistol from someone's waist, they could not even grasp the situation; his sharp aim made him throw the weapons from the hands of the three, the same was the fate of the rest. They scattered, with wounded hands. He initiated a mass protest against the persecution carried out by the state machinery in the name of security, first in his locality and then in other places. It was as if someone obstructed a river from flowing; he removed a couple of clods that served as barricade, and the water rushed turbulently. Amidst fervent protest,

he was being converted into an uncommon personality. People breathed freely....

"Wake up, those hornets and wasps are coming." Dowerah shook the man. The man instantly woke up. An army vehicle halted. An officer came and shook hands with all of them. The officer said very politely, "The public must extend full support to the army in combating the terrorists." Expressing his sympathy for causing trouble to the men the officer drove away. "All army officers are not bad, some are good," the man uttered as if to himself. At around 3 a m all the men left for their respective homes.

The man slept lightly towards early morning. During his sleep he had a dream, a big boil erupted in the slapped cheek, the headless hardened boil caused tremendous pain, the man went on groaning....

Waking up, he drank a cup of tea and went in search of the unknown place. After enquiring to many people he reached the particular road. It was not exactly a road, but a ploughed paddy field; while trying to cover the distance pushing his bicycle along, he fell down twice. He stopped at the junction as directed in the letter. Whom to ask? Where to go? It was beyond his capacity to pay the amount they demanded. He could at the most arrange twenty to twenty five thousand by borrowing. Would they agree? What if they disagreed? His job was here, he had a small house to put his head in though it was only a two-roomed house. Where would he go? Where would he escape? The man sweated profusely. He saw a towel-clad boy standing near him and making gestures to follow him. Following the boy he stepped onto the front yard of a straw hut. It was a rural family hut and an old lady was spreading grain. The house had two rooms; entering the first room he looked around and sat on a chair with a broken handle. His throat was parched. He asked the grain-spreading old lady for a glass of water. The woman came with a glass of water and looking around she enquired, "Have you come to pay money? These fellows are making life unbearable; they neither study nor plough the field, or go to the market; they only do this. For fear of the military and the police we cannot even gather our crops." The boy came with another towel-clad boy and between the two was a boy wearing jeans with a loose fitting striped shirt. The man clearly noticed a gun under the striped shirt, the one with the towel also had a bulge in the shirt near the waist.

The white towel-clad one said, "Give what you have brought."
"Received the letter only yesterday."

"When will you give? We can't give much time," the white towel-clad lad said.

"It will take fifteen-twenty days."

"No", the green towel-clad lad said.

"I cannot give so much, after all I am not worth so much."

"Not a single paise less," the jeans clad lad said.

"Somehow twenty...." The man's throat went dry, he licked his lips.

"Not a single paise less than forty." The voice of the jeans-clad lad had a metallic coolness.

The old lady came running from the front yard. She said something in her dialect. The trio jumped up.

"Don't come out of here, careful, if you tell something...." The jeans-clad lad went out biting his lips.

The man remained sitting in the broken chair inside the hut. He clutched the only intact handle of the broken chair. Closing his eyes, he invited the soft mud-like clouds of darkness. Like an ostrich he stuck his face into the mud. His consciousness was immersed in the darkness. Like the grass growing on alluvial soil during the rainy season, the man inside him grew luxuriantly.

He was tied to a tree in an open field by the trio clad in white towels, a green towel and jeans. He again vehemently declared, "I will never give you anything, not even a single paise."

"What have you said? You are not giving us money." The white towel-clad lad said.

"No I will not give you the money that I have earned by turning my bones into soil and blood into water."

With one single tug he freed himself. He threw all three to the ground with the swiftness of a jungle cat. Growling like a tiger, he said "Call, call your fathers." He dragged the trio like dead rats to a berry tree with a hornet nest hanging from the main branch. "I'll throw you into the hornet's nest, you are growing fat by sucking the blood of human beings, let the hornets also get a share." The trio clutched his feet, "Let us go free." He spat on their faces and on their blood-thirsty weapons. Giving them a couple of kicks he gave the trembling trio their arms. "Take these. Don't think you can dominate with the aid of these for long, time is not always the same." He assured the terror-stricken people of the city; the weak, straw-like people were bound together into bundles. His initiative resulted in the establishment of relations between the people and various anti-terrorist groups. The suppressed people were now like a river that broke all barriers.... A large anti-

terrorist procession came out in the city, he was in the lead. The procession went on lengthening, people went on coming out like rats that came out hearing the Pied Piper's Pipe.

Hearing the sound of firing very close, he staggered. A spark came flying and made a dent in the wall in front of his eyes. He could not comprehend what happened in that split second. He grasped tightly the broken handle of the chair. He simply remembered the quiet woman asking him to give a support to the papaya tree bending with the weight of the large papayas.

The woman was supposed to make coconut delicacies. She might have filled the dish with white *laddus*. The children snatching the *laddus* were perhaps being rebuked "Don't eat all, spare some for your father." All around them there were sounds like crackers bursting. A spark came and penetrated the left side of his chest. He felt as if someone pushed him into a deep well. There was a series of thudding sounds for sometime, then everything was silent.

The open eyelids that never winked out of fear seemed like staring out of amazement. Taking his specs off and placing them in his lap, he seemed to be reclining so as to gaze at his own pools of blood.

Translated from Assamese by Chandana Saikia



The Voice

Chandrakanta

Pitch-dark? Night of Amawas. The sloping roofs of the villages surrounded by mountains loom like mounds of coal or dusky heaps. Trees stand tall, shapeless, ominous—waiting to ambush like evil spirits and demons. A fine drizzle continues—pouring intermittently.

A young girl, keeping a bundle close to her bosom, reaches the ruins—desperate, scared awfully. She is smeared with slime up to her knees and has crossed dissonant forests. She turns again and again in darkness, ears alert to awesome noises. She clings to an old chinar's trunk and tries to guess where she has reached.

Where is she? Pulwama? Anantnag? May be, Brijbihara?

No settlement is seen nearby. Tall, dark poles stand like masked mujahids—thrusting their guns, menacingly at the sky.

Perhaps, she has reached the ruins of Martand.

She gropes, fondles the earth, feels coarse, pointed boulders with her palms and crawls into a sanctuary. Grabs a broad boulder—perhaps a broken idol of the era of Lalitaditya.

A naked sword flashes, tearing the dark clouds. A broken kingdom looms before her eyes. Yes, she has indeed reached the ruins of the temple built by Lalitaditya in the eighth century. She is far, far away from them. They wouldn't come near her. The security forces would be on vigil.

Stretching her ponderous legs, tears tumble over. Her knees are full of pus. A terrible, excruciating pain racks her. The baby cradled in her lap is hardly breathing. Perhaps, she is unconscious. She cannot die. She is used to being suffocated.

She uncovers the baby's face. Feels her breathing. Finding her alive, she has a rush of pity for the baby. Poor thing. Man can get used

to the most beastly torture. The four-month-old baby is also not an exception.

She tickles the baby's tender cheeks with her own. The baby begins to whine, tremulous. An interminable moaning?

A warmth sweeps her breast. She unbuttons her shirt, feels the baby's lips and breastfeeds her—evading her nostrils. Her lips move a little, snatching, here and there. Her hunger makes her gulp mother's milk greedily. Her tiny fingers hold mother's breast. Firmly.

The girl crushes the baby in her arms, fondling her hair. Her half-a-yard frame quivers while gulping the milk. She has been drenched in spite of being wrapped in clothes. The girl wipes the baby's forehead with her *chunri*. She also tries to warm her by hugging her close.

Sitting under boulders, the girl feels safe—safe against showers, there are at places fireflies tinkling among wild grass grown among boulders. There are also scorpion herbs among the boulders. In darkness many fearsome shadows begin to look sinister and forbidding.

The deep silence is broken by the gurgle of a distant stream.

Sitting reclining against a broken idol, the girl's consciousness becomes dim. While running away, and hiding, she had a nasty cut from the root of a sawed tree. The wound was agonizing. Perhaps, blood has been still oozing out. Her slime-smeared feet cannot feel the difference between water and blood.

The baby curls herself in her mother's lap. Contented, she sleeps in peace. The girl also wants to sleep but inauspicious darkness overcomes her. With smarting eyes, she begins to recall the kingdom of that great emperor of the eighth century who had been duped and killed by his own trusted commanders.

Wouldn't the soul of that emperor be wandering nearby? How would it hurt him seeing the broken face of his immortal kingdom?

The girl begins to feel drowsy, her head slumping forward time and again. Sometimes, half-awake, sometimes half-asleep, her eyes close—and open, startled. She becomes alert at the sound of a creature crawling between boulders. A longish snake had crawled by her through mossy cracks.

How many fearsome snakes would be inhabiting these ruins? They could have bitten the little one. The tiny one? They wouldn't have bitten her. For a year, so much poison has been injected into her by venomous snakes and scorpions. A snake that bites her would surely die.

Thinking of the snakes, she has a strong desire to see them once. Mother says, the descendants of snakes that have been killed, do

come to seek revenge. Hence, the last rites of the snakes must be performed.

But who knows? The snakes may not have been killed. They might be chasing her—crawling through caves, passes, crawling stealthily.

She has a feeling that wounded snakes have been chasing her relentlessly. They have been chasing her through white forests and barns, extricating with difficulty their legs sunk in bogs. Lest the baby's cries may help them find her, she has gagged the baby's mouth with her *odhani*. She had felt anguish gagging her. While in hiding, they always used to gag the baby with cloth. Her cry was stifled and tears tumbled over her tiny cheeks.

She has, however, no time for sentiments. If they find her, they wouldn't spare her. It's certain. When the baby's voice gets stifled, the breathing of creatures within plants and trees becomes audible.

Perhaps, they have gone back. The commander might have ordered them to retreat. Something more important than chasing a girl might have come to their mind. Who knows? The fighters of jihad for a new kingdom often say that they have no idea as to what will happen the next moment.

The girl feels indebted to the ruins of Martand. If she had not got this sanctuary, she would have been killed—trapped by her own foot. She might have been craving to die for a year but now she wants to survive, to live.

Something rustles over her back. She scratches her back over a column. Hard. It was an insect. Must have been killed. There would have been scorpion herbs nearby. As she gropes over the earth and finds her way, her palms begin to itch madly. She picks up broken stones and rubs her palms raw.

From a distance, the river keeps on wailing. Pitch-dark, ominous. Her battered frame has been stunned by the wailing. Or perhaps, it has been the effect of the vegetation's fragrance.

Images flash by quickly over a dark canvas. One after another long, long hands drag her into a blind cave.

Vini. Vini. Niki. Ra - - nu, a caravan of words passing by.

'Hikta mikta boi aninam dunya kah...

Kikli Kalir di. Pag mere veer di...

Kikli ke khainu? Ki chor sipahi?

Nahi Aal maal pahala thal,

Ma meri ke lambe bal . . .

How long was Mother's hair? When they held her hair, and dragged her on the floor, her hair enveloped her back.

Perhaps, it was a night of doomsday. Hail, cyclone and storm! The hinges of the doors and the windows were shaken. Mother and Father endeavoured hard to latch the windows.

There was a curfew in the city. The curfew of the warriors? No electricity. Even the breath came out terror-struck. Mother and Father endeavoured to sleep wrapped in a quilt. The doors were rocked. Father got up to open the door. Mother urged him to peep through the keyhole. Father, ash-faced, moved forward to open the door saying, "It's nothing." Four young men broke the door and entered impudently. Eyes and mouths were covered with black clothes.

Mother cried piercingly, "They, they are Devils."

"Don't be scared. We won't kill you. Staying for a night, we'd take leave in the morning."

"Yes, yes," said Father. His lifeless hands moved a little, "Come... Come in son!"

"The police is after us. If anyone asks for us, say there is no one here. Understand!"

"Yes, yes." Father said and got busy in hospitality. Mother laid beds in the next room.

"We're hungry. We want food," ordered the young man in a jacket. Perhaps, he was the leader. He spoke Urdu, literary Urdu.

"Why not? It's your own home."

Mother thought that the extension of hospitality would save her family. She brought an incandescent Kangri and urged them to warm themselves. She headed towards the kitchen.

It seemed as if time had stopped. There was so little oxygen in the air that Mother and Father found breathing extremely difficult. The bearded young man detonated a bomb—

"Listen! Send your daughter with a jar of water. We get thirsty at night." The young bearded man looked towards his companions and smiled lasciviously.

Mother took a jar of water to the threshold of their room. The bearded man frowned and said, "We are dare-devils. We aren't afraid of death. For one murder, we would be hanged to death. For ten murders too, we would be hanged to death. Understand? If you try to be too clever, all of you would die."

His hand gripped his pistol. Vini's legs began to tremble. She endeavoured feverishly to hide herself in some corner of the house. She unlatched a window and jumped out into the lane. It was silence

everywhere. No one could be seen anywhere. Her legs were hurt as she had jumped from the window. As she endeavoured to run away, the bearded young man grabbed her arm quickly and dragged her in, bluntly.

"Dear girl! You would like to see the corpses of your dear father and mother."

Dragging Vini towards their room, they began to strip her well-covered body.

"Please! Don't do this. No.... No...."

Vini kicked them hard. She tried hard to protect herself through her teeth and legs. She remembered Lord Krishna, weeping and cringing but Lord Krishna didn't come to her rescue—didn't protect her from being disrobed. Father and Mother heard their daughter's stifled sobs and cries. They wanted God to come to her rescue but how could God come in a night of curfew.

Vini had to die. She died. Her frame, however, survived. A broken, splintered frame! A squint-eyed young man gazed at her lasciviously and said to her mother. Your daughter has ravished our commander. Lucky you are! She is now of no use in your community. She's been defiled."

At that time, Father's hands were bound. Mother was gagged. Lying flat in the middle of the room, Mother looked dead. Even if hands were not bound, what could have happened?

They took Vini away with them. Wherever they took her, her eyes and mouth were always masked. She kept on walking along with them. From one place to another. Then to the next. Sometimes in a cowshed, sometimes in a room full of hay. Sometimes in deep forests. In caves and ravines. Along with their pistol, AK 47, Kalishnikov and other treasures they had one more important treasure—Vini.

She remained strictly confined for a year. One night they didn't return for a long time. It was a good chance to escape. But escape wasn't easy. Their people kept track of her activities—stealthily. Vini wasn't allowed to die. They wouldn't have condoned her sin of escape. When three of them went away, the fourth kept guard. Ever vigilant.

"You also go. I'll not go anywhere. They are so busy with important work."

Vini attempted to drive him away. They might be ferocious killers but not fools.

Her soul had been lacerated by their vile aggression. He would say, "It is equally important to guard one's treasure."

When they laughed, their black gums glowed with the fibres of raw meat.

Vini's anger grew inward. If she knifed their dark gums, would these gulpers of raw meat be able to smile?

In the beginning, Vini used to feel nauseated. She was soundly thrashed for vomiting on their clothes. But later on, she got used to it.

Every night, stars were nailed in the sky. A brutal beast gnashed his teeth within Vini. If only she could nail their eyes?

She made schemes during the night. In morning, she got busy cooking for them. Any delay enraged them.

In the meanwhile, she became the mother of a daughter. She had cursed God vehemently that night, writhing on a haystack in a cow shed. The one with slimy lips fetched a woman from a village to cut the baby's umbilical cord. The woman was scared. She poured a pitcher full of water on the blood-splashed haystack. A drain of blood gushed through the cowshed. At that time, inhaling the smell of a compound of life and death, the girl began to feel that she was swimming in a river of blood.

The woman brought from the village wiped Vini clean with rags and made her lie on dry hay. Along with her hands, her lips too were trembling.

They wanted to get rid of the baby. Handing over the baby to her, they gave her some instructions. But the woman returned after they had gone out and laid the wrapped baby by the mother's side. Wiping the mother's breasts with her half-soiled *dupatta*, she made the baby's lips touch them. Finding the baby and the mother unconcerned, the woman heaved a heavy sigh, saying, "*Haya badbakhta. Khodaya mokalavinaya.*" (The unfortunate one, may God liberate you.)

Vini is not able to forget her last words. Whether it was a blessing or a curse?

Who was the unfortunate one, Vini or the innocent baby, whose death was implored by the woman?

The moment Vini became conscious, she had an impulse to smother the tiny baby to death and avenge her broken frame and soul's agony. Her hands, however, didn't stir for the extremely easy task. The brutal beast within her couldn't have been gratified so easily. This deed would have liberated the devils.

The next day, pus was formed in the baby's navel. She began to cry loudly. They deemed it extremely necessary for their safety to kill her. A sudden storm gripped Vini. She clung to their feet, saying, "I'll

gag her. She wont cry. See, how much she has been suffering. Have pity on her"

They looked at Vini, astounded. Felt pity for her or might have thought that the small creature could be strangled and silenced any time. They, however, tied the baby's mouth firmly with Vini's old *chunri*. And the baby was hurled in Vini's lap, saying, "You wouldn't be able to gag her. You love her immensely. She's a nuisance for us."

They flew into a rage when the baby cried. Again and again. The cloth was tied firmly over her mouth. When they were away, Vini opened the baby's mouth, hid her inside the *firan*. The cloth's marks were left on the baby's ashen face. When the cloth was loosened, the baby couldn't suck milk with her lips. Vini warmed the cloth on fire and pressed it on her mouth and stomach. She made use of remedies taught by her mother. The baby clung to her firmly. Her tiny emaciated frame was shaken by suppressed sobs. Vini felt an immense rush of pity for her. She had been a witness of her frame's battering but the innocent creature, coming out of her frame, had become an infallible companion. She wanted to protect her at any cost.

A truck passes by. Along with its deep rumble, its headlights tear the darkness and move away from the ruins. Must be a round of the security forces. Vini sits among the ruins, in hiding. Reclining. She hasn't been liberated from the fear within. The security forces are indeed for protection but wouldn't the protector be tempted at the sight of a solitary woman? This is not guaranteed by history and old annals. Then, a woman wandering like a ghost amid impenetrable darkness around ruins would definitely be a suspect.

She hasn't been a decent young woman, has she? The people craving for her have vanished, sunk in the past. Mother and Father might have escaped. Would they accept her wholeheartedly? With open arms?

She could recall that girl who had been able to escape from the terrorists, walking miles across dangerous forests, reaching the refugee camps. The people who had themselves turned beggars didn't allow her to stay in their camps. She had been soiled for them. Misfortunes not only break the people but also shatter their conscience.

Vini becomes furious, mad with rage. Why was she born into a respectable family of Brahmins? She feels like weeping at the sanctity of the devout people who had destroyed their own community. But she has no more tears to shed. Her tears have been denuded. A fire has been searing her dry. Staying with the devils for a year, a brutal

beast has possessed her. Even while within the ruins, full of snakes and scorpions, she had a terrible passion to live and exult.

She had indeed fallen in love with the brutal beast. She was not hindered by love, compassion and concerns. It was a volcano that had saved her from turning into a glacier. But for it, Vini would not have come out of the tomb so easily.

Vini served them with utmost devotion. Sometimes, they crossed the border under avalanche to get supplies. Their feet got swollen due to cold. She fomented their feet in warm saline water. If someone got injured in an encounter, she bandaged him carefully. As if she had been a born nurse! They began to like her.

"You wanted to be a doctor. See. We certify you to be a doctor—without a test."

There was a terror of rats in the hay-filled room. One night, there was a rat bite on the thumb of the long-nosed young man who was a crack shot. When he began to cry, Vini, sombre outwardly, felt happy, thinking they must have chewed his nose.

That day the commander was deeply perturbed. Some of his comrades had joined some other group. He was anguished, "The rascals have no conscience."

Vini massaged his forehead. The rats frolicked over the legs of the commander. In rage, he shot some of them dead. Holding them by their tale, he threw them out.

Vini shook with terror. Must be handling men in the same manner. She told him, looking worried, "How many bullets would you waste? Why not bring the powder to kill rats?"

At this, the thick-lipped one said, "Scoundrel! You want to kill us. Enough bullets for the rats. You needn't bother. Do your own work."

But they were wild rats. Traps couldn't work on them. Vini said, "Get me the powder. I'd mix it in flour and the pellets would be put near the mouth of the rat's hole. Or mix them into dry fish. You could then sleep in peace."

That night, Vini served the commander generously. Perhaps, he was the father of her daughter. Or, was it the one who used to gag her mouth firmly?

The commander was killed due to inordinate love. He got a packet of poison for her. Giving the packet to her, he urged her lovingly, "Keep with care. Wash your hands later on. Otherwise, along with rats, our female rat would also go to heaven."

The packet was deadly.

They had laughed boisterously. Their gums were visible. Vini paid no heed to their bloody gums.

"How could I die? I've to slog for you."

"Fine! When we make our government, we'd make you a Minister." The commander looked at her from a new angle. "You seem to be an educated, sensible girl."

Vini had earned the trust of the commander.

At night, she cooked *rogan-josh*. Very spicy. Fragrant. They gulped down bottles of liquor. Ate ravenously. Praised her cooking. Slept soundly after dinner.

Vini handled the utensils for a while. In the din, her ears were all alert. Her nerves became her ears. Strange sounds came from the hay-beds. Then, vomiting, severe vomiting.

Vini saw four sturdy frames writhing in agony.

The beast within her was at last gratified.

Vini came out of the hay-filled room, bare-footed. The baby in her arms! After ages, the tomb's mouth opened. Standing in the bare courtyard, she looked at the dwarfish mountains. Her head high? She also saw the wick of the lamp flicker and die. Someone lighted a torch. Perhaps, it was a message for them. Getting no response, they could reach the room.

Vini started running, wildly. She would run towards the end of the world. Tearing into the winds, crushing the earth, battered, bleeding profusely. Her mission accomplished.

Contented, weary, she got stuck in the ruins of Martand.



The broken idols are awakened at the cock's first cry. Vini opens her eyes, utterly startled.

"What has happened to them? Whether the people with torches dug their graves or scorched them in the hay-filled room?"

Dawn arises from the eastern sky. Gugi hidden among chinara leaves begins to warble with elan.

Vini gets up—slime-smeared. Rain has made pools at many places. Reaching a clean, transparent pool she lays down her baby over a spacious rock. Entering the water, she begins to remove slime from her frame.

The baby begins to whine and later on cries loudly. The rock's hard surface forces her to cry lustfully.

Vini finds her cry incomparable. As if she has heard it for the first time.

She pours water over her baby. Her palms are full.

The baby's voice resonates among the ruins. Soars skywards. All fear evaporates out of her heart.

Translated from Hindi by N.P. Singh



Nostradamus Commits Suicide

Nabarun Bhattacharya

Some day his father bought himself a copy of *Nostradamus's Predictions* from a chapbook hawker while commuting for home on a bus. It predicted that in the seventh month of 1999 a frightful god of devastation would descend. He never believed it. Nobody ever does. Like that he never thought that this motherless good-for-nothing boy was not a normal one. None expects the boy to attain the normal age of a man. And, that the boy does so, if at all, is also unimaginably worrying. What if the inevitable happens to him? Who would then look after this gigantic worthless boy on the breadline in this rented house in the colony? No sooner does the boy cross the threshold than every one, young or adult, would make fun of him. Yet he shudders even to believe that the boy may die young. So when the boy sleeps with his huge and disproportionate body under a *kaanthaa*¹ during the night, his father sits up, takes out his specs, and presses his temples with both hands. He can clearly see before his eyes strange spirals of light, dark waves, foams, and fog. Sometimes, in this room itself, a faint shadow nearly takes the configuration of his wife. Which disappears as fast. A film is on show in some neighbouring houses. Its dialogues turn into a welter of incomprehensible yet suggestive lump of sound. As these reach the ears, they can arrange them with their own words in a virtually meaningful order. The boy breathes not through his nose, but through his open mouth; his abnormal round eyes are half open: The hired fan is rotating just at the point where the blades are not discernible. Moles with patchy fur and huge rats are getting in through the kitchen gutter. They cannot move the aluminium rice pot filled with water; but the two enamel plates stacked against the pot are clanging. Tumblers are rolling. The cockroaches and house lizards can make sounds too. They are the most numerous, who can make no

sound: the ants. His father lies on his back keeping his eyes shut, and tries to recall the features in the picture of the goddess *Kali*² from the framed print, which is hanging on the wall in the dark. Even a garland of dried up China rose is also stuck there on the cover glass. The flowers are rotten, dry and moulded; the dry mould has stained the cover glass at places. The old newspaper piece that is pasted at the back of the picture frame is full of moth-eaten bullet holes. The newspaper is *The Statesman* bearing 15 August 1973 on the dateline. There are a few ads in the wanted column – the Bombay Gas Company wanted an Industrial Chemist, and a Senior Press Tool Designer was wanted for the Girnār Scooter Project under the Gujarat Small Industries Corporation. The remaining ads are left out in a half or a quarter; it's hard to make out but at least it's clear that a stenographer was wanted by some company. Now it is July 1999. His father also fell asleep at a point of time. A little away on the left of the picture of the goddess *Kali* hangs a pair of footprints in *aaltaa*³. Lately, a mercury lamp has been fixed at the crossing, where the path joins the alley. Reflected from a wall of the house, its glow does indeed spread out into this room through the thin slit above the leaves of the door that has a chain-and-hook in lieu of a latch. Then the father and the son were sleeping. Prior to both July 1914 and September 1939, many people and their relations, their sons and daughters, and their dear ones, slept in this kind of reflected shadowy glows.

Through that whole night, and through millions of years that followed, there will be many planets like the earth in the Milky Way. This is the earth where once upon a time some intelligent, civilized, and educated species thrived. They could make a lot of things—from pyramids to sewing machines, from machine guns to missiles, and from cooking spuds and ladles to laser guns to neutron bombs, and even to fixing rockets, each carrying as many as ten nuclear warheads on a single nuclear submarine. They could achieve every splendid thing—from epics to magical-realist novels, concrete poetry, fusion music, and advanced theatre. But this planet is now brought to ruins, as many others are—as dead as a dodo, useless remains of energy like burnt coal, and like a glorious civilization turned into ashes, as in a huge crematory for burning. Even in July 1999, half a hemisphere of the earth was shining bright with illuminating electric lamps, wherein at given coordinates, the motherless, awkward-looking son, and his father were fast asleep. It is not unreasonable to guess that about ten or twelve days were still left in the month of July.

The boy grew up to five feet and two inches tall at ten years of

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age, and his head had been taking the queer shape of a rhombus. Then the doctor at the polyclinic camp organized by the Lions Club – as a doctor he was not a dud but a formidable US-returned specialist – took a close look at the boy and observed:

‘Well, really a very rare and interesting case it is. Not to be found often at this young age. The disease is known as acromegaly – your son would gradually grow into a giant. Suppose, he is now, only at ten years of his age, already five ... two...come twenty years, you could as well expect him to be eight feet tall. Overactive pituitary gland. The tallest acromegalic on record is from Finland – can you believe it – a full nine feet and five inches! But your son’s case is very, very special. Never have I heard of such an instance before the normal period of growing tall. I am afraid that there may not be a great deal to do about it.’

“Doctor, sir, how long do they survive?”

“There’s such a case in the States when the patient crossed forty-two. But take it from me; it’s a progressive disease, and a fatal one. Such damned ciphers are hard put to stand the given circumstance too long *per se*.”

In July 1999 the boy grew five feet and ten inches tall at twelve. If the boy could live around five years more, suffering from and yet surviving his acromegaly, gigantism, or giantism, whatsoever you call it, he would surely turn into a huge monster. In that case, there is little doubt that some Indian or foreign circus party would offer a handsome price for the boy. Circus companies do buy or hire giants even as they buy or hire dwarfs. Every one, even the one who may not have watched “*Aappu Raajaa*”⁴, knows that a dwarf does make a good clown. Dwarfism is opposite to gigantism; when the pituitary gland is non-functional, yielding almost no pituitary hormone at all.

The doctor could read the state of the father’s mind. He said: “But I would rather give you a piece of advice. Stop worrying yourself sick about your son’s health. Didn’t you tell me just now that he has lost his mother, and the relatives are not sympathetic? Little or nothing you can do. He has to be looked after by you only. You’ve got to keep living, don’t you? Instead of worrying too much and always about your son, take a little care about yourself.”

“What good is it taking care about myself, sir?”

“No, such a plea cuts no ice. One cannot make do with nothing for a living. You’ve to live through with proper food and nourishment, and remain in health. Oh, yea, you can take sleeping pills. Do you sleep well, or you don’t?”

"Sometimes I do, and sometimes I don't. Varied dreams, do you get me? Some fearful, some worrying."

"Take a Calmpose Five a day. Half an hour before dinner."

"Contemplating to take him for a morning walk. I am afraid if I cannot get up in time."

"Well, go to bed early. There will be no problem."

Soon after the father had gone away with his son, the siren wailed the danger alarm. Roads and places got deserted in no time. The doctor tuned in to the FM channel on the radio. A bunch of unidentified aeroplanes was advancing from the direction of the Bay of Bengal toward India. Such was the information generated by the satellites and radars. The doctor recalled a funny incident. The radio stopped transmission; it made no murmur at all. The crows were cawing unusually and unremittingly. Some French baron once attempted to produce super-monsters by crossing between giants and giantesses. A crazy crotchet of a rich man, or what else! All of them had but all normal-looking issues. The siren wailed again: All clear! The like of which happens too often these days.

As the public transport thinned all of a sudden, the morning had advanced by the time the father and son were home. The father had to set himself to cook food. While coming back home he bought a strip of Calmpose tablets too. Known to the drug store, he needed no prescription to produce. When they were eating a helicopter flew quite low, with a roar. The father and son rushed out before they had finished eating, with their hands unwashed. So many others too rushed out. The logotype, 'INDIAN AIR FORCE', was hugely printed on its body. Through the sky a thickened trail of long, wavy stripes of white smoke was stretched to an unknown destination, which billowed out from a jet fighter that flew across the sky. They came back and sat down again to resume eating. The father could not get to his office that day. He bargained a good buy of a cracked egg, and four sour-and-hot lozenges for his son in the afternoon.

But then people presumed for certain that there couldn't be a War. As before the First and the Second World Wars, before the Third World War too people naively believed the same way that there could be no War.

"Did you care to listen to the BBC World News yesterday? If I had a homestead on the countryside I would have cut myself away from this hell of a place. As they were saying, "Time is short and the sand is running out," - thus said Toynbee or someone else."

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"Stop yapping! To commit oneself to war? Who'll strike in a war first? Not a single bomb was dropped on the US soil in the World War II. Will they risk precipitating a war?"

"Oil! They'll do it for oil."

"Hardly do you keep up with happenings! Do they have an insignificant wealth of oil in the Texas oil field? And they have made a good strategic oil reserve from the Arab oil they have been purchasing for so long. Let them spend that stock out. War for oil is a myth! Is there any oil hunger in Russia, so long as Siberia is there? Has China no oil?"

"Much as you may argue, sure enough there is going to be war. Every time it starts from the Balkan area. And the Middle East."

"It's all hollow blustering. Part of the game. Well, yes, sure there is going to be some internal squabble – as in Russia, the army was engaged to get the communists hashed at will."

"No-o, sir! Much water is yet to flow down. The CNN has telecast the confirmed news: Understanding that an American fleet is approaching, the Chinese Navy is to put up a blockade around Taipei. Awful is the state of affairs."

A printed poster was pasted on the wall they stood beside; in bold fonts it read: *'Those who Spread Rumours are Enemies of the Country.'*

That evening the TV was on in the *paadaa*⁶ clubroom. The father was away at the market. The boy came out of the room, and sought to watch the TV nosing through the roadside window of the clubroom. Having spotted the *raakshhas*⁷ the club boys closed the window. The boy then returned to the room. He had to duck, lest his head should hit the doorframe top. He found that his father was yet to come back. He struggled taking out an old school suitcase from under the cot. It contained a flayed canvas ball, some marble balls, and an old sports magazine with Sourav Ganguli in a batting posture on the cover. From inside the suitcase, he took out the *ludo*⁸ board, with both the leaves torn apart, the *gutis*⁸, the dice thrower⁸, and the *cinque*⁸, the dice of *ludo*. He then spread the board on the bed, and arranged the pieces in four starting boxes. He started playing too. The red pieces stayed put at their starting box. The *cinque* either did not show up the six *phontaas*⁸ to be in the play for a number of turns in succession, or showed them three times in a row to let every turn for the red *gutis* go to waste. His father returned home a little later, lighted the stove and put rice for cooking. The father considered taking a sleeping pill

that night but resisted himself in the end. Not only the mercury lamp on the alley corner, but also not a lamp in the city were lit any more since that night.

Beyond their *paadaa* is a government housing-complex. Its Central Park is quite artistically laid out. Earlier the Indian Oil, and later the Peerless Finance, took up the task of laying and dressing the park. As a result, there are marvellous objects to play with, such as a mock locomotive, a slide for children, a rocking cradle, and a riding cube. There are so many delightful species and varieties of seasonal flowers and ornamental plants. Creepers trained on iron frames have made sorts of topiaries in the forms of a green elephant and a tiger. Large goldfish gently swam in a round pool at a central spot. A kiddy tortoise too. Around the park runs a circular street. Those who walk down this street put on tracksuits or shorts, showy sportswear T-shirts, and sneakers of different makes—Adidas, Reebok, Action. Lots of many other things! Middle-aged couples, groups of elderly men, young executives, widely celebrated actors of yesteryears — no longer appearing as tinsel heroes — are the regulars among morning walkers. Besides, there are those who walk to shed off their bulky waistline, and those who have to walk routinely to take care of their diabetes or heart ailments. Even as it's only the daybreak for the crows, some children also appear on the scene. A group of girls in their teens speed-ride their bicycles ceaselessly round and round the park. A few are too old or incapacitated, and have to be toddled by others.

To all of them, the father in his soiled *lungi* and half-sleeve shirt, and the tall, straight, awkward, and monstrous-looking son appeared to be a disgusting misfit for the ambience. The same morning a young boy came briskly pedalling his tricycle with his father. The boy is very intelligent indeed, and knows English names of many animals. Back home, he told his mother: "Mum, today I went with dad and found a gorilla there."

"Gorilla! Are you sure you could spot it right? How do you know for certain that it was not a baboon or orang-utan?"

"No mum, it must be a gorilla. Its arms were hanging." The father of the boy laughed aloud.

"Could be a spastic or some such kind, who knows? Can one stand a sight like this in the morning?"

"Belongs to our Complex?"

"No, no. Must be an outsider. Someone from here could be recognized. Oh! How grotesque and bizarre."

"Ah, what a plight!"

On that day itself, as one of the precautionary measures before they are charged, the NATO, Russia, China, Britain, and France took out many of the long-range ballistic missiles from the underground silos, each of them carrying nuclear warheads of some hundred megatons. The countries that possessed and used the atomic weapons were Israel, South Africa, India, Pakistan, Brazil, Argentina, and some countries of the Middle East. On that day itself Venezuela and Colombia in Latin America lodged themselves in border skirmishes. The fighter planes of the US and Cuba had an unequal encounter between them on the high sea. The Russian force engaged themselves in a terrible fight with the fundamentalists at the Tajikistan frontier. On the other hand, the news had it that along the Russian-Polish frontier there were extensive preparations of war. On the sea to the north of Britain, the Royal Air Force flew three raids to destroy unknown submarines. The American air force landed in Yemen to stave off a terrible civil war. The Taliban army of Afghanistan started strife with Pakistan. North and South Korea inflicted air strikes on each other. Both Seoul and Pyongyang were air-raided. Armenia and Azerbaijan began a fierce tank battle around the Nagorno-Karabakh Region. Even during that night his father did not venture a sleeping pill.

They went for a walk around the Central Park next morning. For obvious reasons, there were only a few people. Only that group of teen-age girls were whizzing around the park at wind speed. The sight of the boy tickled them to giggles.

"Father, they are staring back at me and laughing over and over again."

"Let them laugh. Lend no ears to it."

"I shall not! No, I shall not lend my ears!" The boy muttered and followed his nose. He kept his ears pressed and laughed aloud in fun. The father gave a sidelong look at the son. To get to see the son's face the father has to look up. The son was laughing. His head was huge. A rhombus. The bones are growing all around.

"Father, why have they made an elephant of a tree?"

"If they have made, let them. What is it to you or me? Come along. Take quick strides for my sake."

The father's office closed early for the day. He returned home and found the son rapt in playing *ludo*⁸. All in the office were saying that a war is going to break out. Break out it must. On his way back home there were loose clusters spread out here and there. Crowds

gathered before the TV shops that kept their sets on. The father also stood for a while for once. Some channel was telecasting the war news. Rockets were rising, bunching up from a vehicle that looked like a lorry. A burning aeroplane plunged into the sea. The father could ill afford to stand any more.

That was the night when the father took a sleeping pill for the first time. The next morning the son got up in time, and found the father sleeping. He did not wake his father up. He opened the door and came out. Then the morning was yet to be very clear. It was wet and sultry. A light drizzle was there. The boy reached the Central Park to find none. He started walking, counting one...two...three...four.... He walked past the trees, and the creeper tiger back on his left. Now would appear the locomotive. He is much taller than the park fence railing. A water tank is there in the park. Thousands of birds chirp in the trees on other mornings. There's not a tweet today. The unending columns of fence railings were passing backward on the left. Three wicket-gates to enter the park passed back. Here comes the Gate Number Four. The creeper tiger is to come before that. Beyond the fourth gate stands the creeper elephant. Suddenly, the thought that he has come unaccompanied occurred to him. His father wakes him everyday. But today his father neither got up nor woke him up. Father is not by his side. Now the boy felt scared without his father's presence. A gust of wind blew in.

So many killings have taken place in the 20th Century. Eleven million in World War I, 46 million in World War II, 20 million in Stalin's social engineering, 20 million in China's war of liberation, and those in various experiments following that (including those in the Cultural Revolution and during the Great Leap Forward, according to Amartya Sen's estimate), genocides in Bangladesh and Kampuchea, the wars of liberation in Vietnam and Cuba, and catching and killing of Camilo Cionofuegos and Che, the killing of Nguyen van Troi, wars in Angola, Kenya, Guinea-Bissau, Spain (Caudwell, Ralph Fox), Korea, the India-China, India-Pakistan, Iraq, Falkland, Arab-Israel wars...and, besides that, the unending Guerrilla wars, clandestine attacks, killing of thousands of Trotskyites, killings in Sri Lanka, aeroplane explosions, killings and killings, and killing sprees on the Naxalites in West Bengal and all over India in the seventies, killings in Bosnia, Yemen, the Hutu-Tutsi skirmishes, the incessant mass killings in Bihar, etc. Those who had come through till the end of the 20th Century, that is, those who were still alive in July 1999, worried little about such a bonfire of

blood. This inventory of the unforeseen, unnatural, and inhuman deaths is incomplete. Who is there to record the destruction of tens of millions of Milky Ways, or hundreds of millions of planets? The unconscious, insensitive, and magic-driven humans could figure out little of this mystery. Never did they know either. They meticulously took spinach in winter, and booked circus shows to see the monster and the dwarf at one go, and the elephant and the tiger together in the same arena. They even arranged the Olympic Games.

Suddenly the siren yelled piercing all over, and through one end to another of the dead hours of the night. The unnaturally overgrown boy stood still, as still can be. Suddenly there appeared from nowhere fountains of doodles of light in the sky. Explosions thundered in close succession high up above the sky. Even further above that, there was the roar of aeroplanes flying. In that sky glowing all over, he found a parachute descending like a rocking locket firework. It carried no man. Roused suddenly from sleep as the siren shrieked, the father did not find his son on the bed. He tried in vain only to find that the lights could not be switched on. As the father rushed out of the house, keeping the door wide open, the sky was glowing all over. He ran on until he could find the son on the street around the central park, drowned in the flashes of light. He was gazing high up the sky. The father shouted at the top of his voice.

"Run away from there. The war is on!"

The boy screamed :

"Fa...ther..."

Around two thousand feet above the ground the parachute was rocking even as it was descending. It formed into a huge ball of fire, and exploded in a surge as though many suns flashed. That horribly abominable fire from the explosion vaporised the father, the son, and many things else. A cruel cloud of burning smoke billowed and spiralled up. While forming itself into a huge and sinister mushroom, it sucked in the entire air. But in this airlessness, innumerable gusts of storm rushed in. The whole city first suddenly blazed up, and then began burning up furiously. After that for so many years the earth had to exist through the age of blind winter following the nuclear war.

Transcreated from Bengali by Mrinal Kanti Dasgupta (October 2005)

["Nostradamus Commits Suicide" is a transcreation from Nabarun Bhattacharya's original Bangla short story, "Nostradamuser aatmahatyaa" (1996), compiled in *Andha Beraal* (2001), (Srishti Prakasan, BB 102, V I P Park, Kolkata 700 059).]

Notes

- 1 *kaanthaa* - wrapper usually made by Bengali housewives from a needle- or patchwork of old and worn cotton cloths.
- 2 *Kali* - the awe-inspiring Hindu goddess to destruct and devour the evil-doers.
- 3 *aaltaa* - red lac dye solution used traditionally to decorate the borders of the feet of a Hindu married woman; a pair of footprints on paper, customarily taken in the dye, as the memory of a Hindu wife, who had died leaving her husband alive - as a sign of chastity.
- 4 *Aappu Raajaa* - a Hindi film based on a story around circus.
- 5 Calmpose - a brand of diazepam.
- 6 *paadaa* - a crowded urban habitation with good neighbourly feeling.
- 7 *raakshhas* - a glutton, monster.
- 8 *ludo* - a board (with two leaves in a single fold) game of 'playing dice' with a cube or cinque (*chhakkaa*) with one to six pips (*phontaa*), each marked on its six faces - 1,6; 2,5; 3,4 - each pair making seven, a dice thrower to throw the dice, and four button-like pieces (*gutis*) each for each of the four starting boxes.
- 9 *lungi* - a long loincloth worn as the lower piece of dress for men.

Amartya Sen - Ethical economist, Nobel Laureate;

Camilo Cionofuegos - Cuban revolutionary and handsome icon to communists, loyal to Fidel Castro, follower of Che Guevara, the revolutionary of Cuba and Bolivia;

Caudwell, Christopher (1907-1937) - British poet, communist, and philosopher, most well-known for his book, *Illusion and Reality*, called by E P Thompson as "the anatomist of ideologies", sent to fight as a member of the International Brigade at Spain, but called back (?) to serve the party better as a theoretician, which message might not have reached him, even as he died in the Spanish civil war;

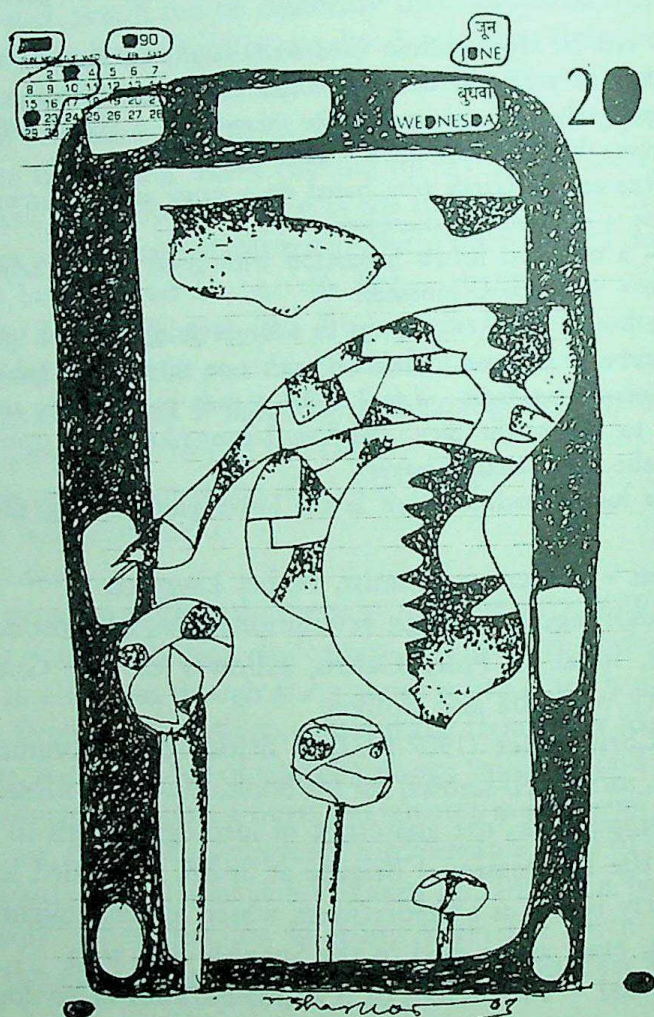
Hutu and Tutsi - Two tribes of Rwanda-Burundi in prolonged conflict;

Nguyen van Troi - Vietnamese worker revolutionary, caught attempting to kill Robert McNamara by bombing from under a road bridge, while the latter was visiting Vietnam as the then US Secretary of

Defence; he would not admit 'his crime', or close his eyes before being shot dead at 30 years of age;

Ralph Fox (1900-1937) - Poet and columnist, communist, literary theorist, well-known for his book, *The Novel and the People*, died in the Spanish civil war;

Sourav Ganguly - Striker batsman of West Bengal, and the most successful captain of the Indian Cricket Team.



Naïve

Sagari Chhabra

“**T**hey say it was around the eighteenth century that the British came to Calicut and founded it.”

“Founded it” I repeated. You see, I was a child receiving my earliest history lesson from my teacher.

“You mean no one was there, so they found it?” I asked, wide-eyed.

“No one” replied the teacher, calmly.

“No one” he paused, “except us... but we didn’t really count. We were just...well,” and he searched for the right word and then found it, “natives”.

“Natives” I repeated in wonder.

“What is a native?”

The teacher looked at me with affection, “Take away the ‘t’ and that is what you are my dear, na-iv-e!” And then he laughed, ever so gently.

“Did they take away our tea?”

“They took more than just our tea,” replied the teacher, patiently, “they took our self-esteem, our confidence and our ability to believe in ourselves.”

With that ended my first history lesson but I had learnt two new words.

Now the British came a long time ago. Then a frail, old man in a loincloth made salt by the sea. He said, no one could tax salt, which was eaten by the poorest of the poor. This taxed the minds of the rulers. Then he urged everyone to weave and wear only homespun cotton. Women from the confines of their homes started spinning their way towards freedom, and it was this, the rulers said, had warped the very fabric of the empire. Outside India, there was a fiery man who wore

military boots and thundered; "*tum mujhe khoon do, mein tumhe azaadi doonga!*" – "You give me blood and I will give you freedom!" He even formed the first all women's military wing, ready to fight for the freedom of the country. The rulers could not bear the thought of even young women baying for their blood, so they left, but not without partitioning my country into two. There was so much blood on the streets...only it was the blood of natives, so it didn't really count.

But that was a long time ago. I was born much later and these are mere history lessons. When I grew up and looked around, I saw a new set of people in power. They were all natives; but they had an indifferent look on their faces and liked to drive fast cars. If the people cried, they pretended not to hear. Their ears were attuned to the high and mighty. I am told this attitude is called 'having an air'.

I saw the new rulers dispossessing poor people from their land, in the name of development. They put them into tin sheds, far away from their livelihoods and called it 'rehabilitation'. I thought that is what people on wheelchairs underwent, but these were able-bodied people who were being wheeled out of their own ancestral land. I had thought that a laundry was where dirty clothes were washed and made clean, but they turned black money around and called it 'money-laundering'. When I told the others, they called me names; 'publicity-seeker' even 'anti-national'. They said, I was somebody who was intent on sullyng the image of my country abroad.

I went to my teacher, who had now retired and lived by the banks of the river Ganga, reciting Sanskrit slokas. I bowed, touched his feet and spoke humbly; "I have seen truth, but no one believes me."

He turned to me and spoke gently, "My dear, you are still, naïve". It is not enough to see truth, you must prove truth."

"How do you prove, truth is true?" I pleaded. But he turned back to the quick-silver image in the running water and spoke, "Sort *maya* from *satya*."

By now I knew '*maya*' was illusion and '*satya*' truth, but how could I prove it?

I went from seminar to seminar, but they spoke in grand, eloquent terms about the trickle-down theory and other such complex things. When I said I could not comprehend them, they said I was simple-minded.

The man in the loin-cloth had been shot long ago and the man in the big boots had died in a mysterious air crash. So I went back to my teacher, who was now extremely old and weak but deep in

meditation. He looked at me with eyes full of compassion. His twisted arthritic hand painfully touched just my wrist, then he whispered, "Let your skin... turn... darker" and then fell quiet. This time I thought he had turned delirious, for I really could not fathom his words.

I travelled the length and breadth of my beloved land. I saw people drinking hot water for dinner and mothers selling their bodies, so they could feed their children. I realized, we had treated only one set of people as members of our family and kept the other half outside. When I embraced them, they told me, "But, we are the untouchables." I understood then, the heart of darkness.

I returned to my teacher, who was now clearly dying. His mouth was contorted; he spoke painfully, but his eyes were full of love. "The sun has burnt your skin" he said, "from every pore of your body, your own people have entered your heart." Then like a trembling leaf, his gnarled hand barely touched my forehead and fell.

I cremated him myself and that night I cried. I cried so much that my white pillowcase soaked in tears, turned into a white sheet. The tears were transformed into words. Those words are wafting towards you.



The Way We Are

Siddhartha Rai

April storm had just yielded to the scorching sun of May and a dreary rain persisted in a hopeful tryst to ease the heat. A faint drizzle dragged on since yesterday and all around, the lavishly green tea bushes bore fresh new buds which over-brimmed one's heart with a certain innate mirth. The siris trees shooting up amidst the jostling tea bushes had also begun to appear a radiant green, thus appearing like specks of green cotton clouds. Some of those siris trees seem joyfully overwhelmed by the sudden burst of its pure white flowers. Clouds appear and disappear above. Rain falls, then the sun shines and it rains again. This is life here in all its dramatic wholeness.

Dhanbir is drenched today too, like every other day, plucking fresh leaves from those bushes. Along with him is Jitman and Thule plucking too, almost like a virtual tea plucking machine. All their hope, despair and aspiration are irrevocably linked with this tea garden and their entire aims and desires are crushed, charred and sucked among these very bushes and in the factory very much like those tender buds of tea.

Their lives bear no difference excepting for untimely and unpredictable death.

Everybody, like years ago, are merely the same labourers in the same old tea garden, or chaprasi and munshi in the same factory. Only the manager at times change. Dhanbir's days too pass on in the same old drab and dreary way.

Okayti Tea Estate lay closed since last winter. After their only means of livelihood was snatched from them, all the labourers of the estate were alarmed and agitated. Some broke into the factory while many tore away those bushes to make room for farming. Yet, a certain

fear lurked within them, for, despite their untiring efforts, the tea estate could never be revived. The same fear lurked within all — the devastating fear of the estate being closed down.

A piercing bodyache had been tormenting Dhanbir since the time he sprayed pesticide at the number four section of the tea estate yesterday.

"All of you go to spray 'medicine' in the same area as yesterday's. Our company's condition isn't good, so work well, no shirking work," the munshi had said, this very morning. He had to say so. Dhanbir had picked up his can of 'medicine' along with the spraying machine and had set off for his work with his friends.

The dreary downpour had just stopped and a meek pale sun had taken its place in the rain-washed sky. It was Saturday and thus Dhanbir along with Jitman had steadily walked towards the office just beside the factory. A bright glow of light shone distinctly on their faces in the same old hope of receiving their weekly wages for their labour.

As they neared the office and approached the window wherefrom their wages were disbursed, they found that it was shockingly shut. Both could comprehend nothing and yet a swelling crowd had formed there, all labourers, seeking remuneration for their weeklong back-breaking travail.

In a short while, the head munshi appeared on the office varandah and standing straight said in a loud hoarse voice audible to everybody, "You see, our estate has become the same as Okayti's. The estate is running at a loss and is carrying on merely because it happens to be a large one. We have to slog harder in order to save it. Now our head sahib will say a few words on the condition of our estate, so listen carefully."

After this bit of oration, a tall man with a blue cap adorning his head walked out of the office door. He was the manager. Looking towards the swollen crowd of labourers he began, "Our garden is running at a loss. And it is only on the benevolence of our company that our estate is still plodding on. If the estate shuts down all of you will starve. Our boss is merciful and that is why he has ordered not to shut down the estate. Henceforth only the wages will be given. Other facilities will no longer exist. The task of saving the estate lies entirely in your hands; work harder, do not fight and there should be no strikes. Or else, the estate will have to be closed. Now, all of you go and collect your wages."

Siddhartha Rai / 91

Each one glanced at the other's face. Everybody remained dumb and answerless. Anyhow, we've got to accept, somebody in the crowd said. "Poor company, how long should it feed us. Come, let us go to office and collect our wages."

Nobody dared to ask anything. Everybody walked off to receive their wages. Dhanbir too went along.

After receiving their wages, both Dhanbir and Jitman went out of the factory gate counting the money in hand. All other fellow labourers too walked out counting their money. The usual mirth on their faces could no longer be seen. Dhanbir continued to walk with a certain deep despair. Thenceforth, both walked towards their homes chewing pan.

Dhanbir reached his hut. The heavy downpour and the hot sun of May had made the maize plants overgrown, which hid his old and dilapidated wooden hut completely. His hut's roof, perforated, lay blackened with soot and smoke. From the hut's kitchen, clots of black smoke emerged tearing its way into the sky in a slow tempo. The kitchen was walled with scraps of metal cut out of old kerosene tins. Just beside stood the hen's coop and nearby the hens loitered around, feeding merrily.

Dhanbir left his basket outside and sauntered into the kitchen. Tea boiled in a soot-stained black kettle atop the oven. The shelves contained white aluminium plates, yellow brass ones and mugs and saucers, while two copper pitchers stored drinking water.

Sitting next to the warm oven Saily didi went on chopping squash with a sharp sickle in her hand. She passed a fleeting glance at him but said nothing and went on chopping squash.

"Did you bring your wage?" she enquired after some time, still chopping squash.

"Yes, but we won't be getting any ration henceforth. And....the company is running at a loss; they say the estate is going to close down too. Other estates are rapidly closing down. Munda, Ambotia, all have already closed down."

He suddenly stood up straight and without a word came out of the hut. Then he plodded towards the lower end of the village clearing his way through the full grown maize plants.

It is pitch darkness all around and only the hoarse croak of the dotted frog shatters the stunning silence of the dark night.

At long last, Dhanbir appeared and knocked on the hut's door. Didi opened the creaky door. He entered swiftly and the sickening

stink of the strong country liquor escaped along with his hot breath. Didi pushed him into his room and left him to sleep.

In the dead of night, everybody is fast asleep. Only Dhanbir lay muttering, incomprehensibly, tearing the silent emptiness of the dark chilly night.

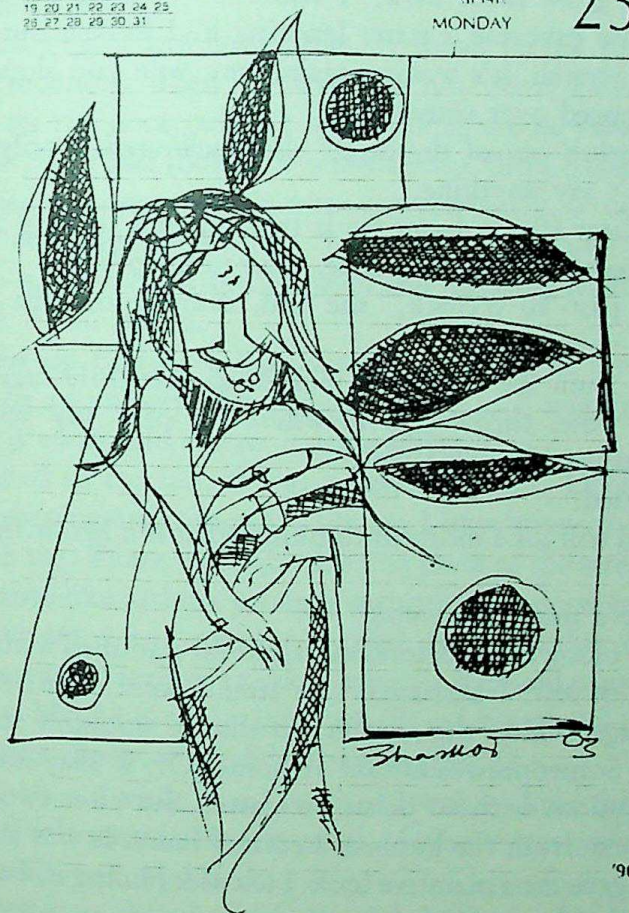
Translated from Nepali by Aswini Tamang



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सोमवार
MONDAY

23



'90

Siddhartha Rai / 93

Catwalk

Unni R.

"Let it grow more dark," I said.

My wife gave me a stare. Ignoring it, I looked out.

"That wretch, it's wailing again," my wife said aloud. Feigning deafness, I pored over something.

"It'll break out of the cage," she murmured angrily.

I didn't say anything.

I can hear it cry. I can see it twisting and turning in the cage.

She went on whipping time. And time sped by.

"It is past 10 o'clock," she lied, even before the hour hand reached 10.

I rose from the chair and picked up that little cage.

"This time, throw it somewhere far off," my wife said. "It shouldn't return like last time."

I nodded.

I stood still for a moment thinking what if it broke the cage open and escaped.

"Make a move, will you?"

I didn't look back. Behind me, the door slammed with a big noise.

Right or left? I hesitated. Last time I went right. And I left it in the garbage behind the market. So that it wouldn't starve. It was a cute one. Someone would take it home. Or, it may stumble upon some companions without home or master. But after two days, there was a little cry from the kitchen. I rushed there. It was standing near the door. It gave me a plaintive look. I felt sad. Hiding it, I asked, "How did you find the way?"

Even amidst the misery, it gave me an all-knowing smile.

I gave it rice and fish. It finished the whole thing leaving nothing behind. It didn't even take a look at me while eating.

I looked at it. It was only two days, but it had a famished look.

When my wife entered the scene, we were both sitting there together. "Oh, this wretch has returned," saying this, she gave it a kick. A little adept at human skills, I dodged the kick. Otherwise, the kick would have landed on me too.

Looking skywards, it cried lying out there in the yard.

"God will curse you," I said.

"I'll put up with the curse," said she, giving me an angry look.

I didn't go down the yard towards it; but it limped its way to the foot of the coconut tree. And closing its eyes, it lay down there.

"If you let it in again, I will kill it."

I nodded.

"Don't enter the house again," I said: "She threatens to kill. You or me, I don't know."

It didn't enter the house, but lay down in the yard.

This morning, when my wife was not there, I heard someone scratching on the door, while I was reading the newspaper. When I lowered the paper and looked, it was standing there hiding behind the door. I asked it to come in. It came in reluctantly. It came near and rubbed its body against my leg. I read the newspaper aloud. As if listening to it all, it cried and growled and nuzzling itself close to my legs, dozed. I too dozed.

I woke up hearing a loud scream. Pointing at the cage in the corner of the room, my wife shouted at me as if warning: "Tonight itself, take it away and throw it somewhere."

I walked to the left. It was a deserted street. Once in a while, a star was peeping from the sky. Or am I imagining it? I don't have a torch with me. There was light in some parts of the street. They too were flickering like asthma patients, struggling to draw in some light.

Pardon me, I said within. It cried. It was saying, it is okay, I comforted myself. I wanted to ask it whether it would come back again. But I didn't. Maybe it too wanted to ask me whether I really would throw it away. Both of us didn't say anything.

It was after a while that I realized I was walking through a very dark street. I felt scared. Then it cried. Maybe it was saying, don't get scared. I comforted myself.

"Whereto, at this time of the night?," queried a female voice. Frightened, I stood still.

"Don't be afraid," said that voice.

It was then that I realized it was not a female voice.

"Don't do anything to me," I pleaded in fear. Then he laughed, in a ringing voice.

"Am I a policeman, to do anything to you?"

I felt a little at ease. Not knowing what to do, I stood there in the darkness.

"Let us walk," he said. I nodded. As it was dark, he didn't see me nodding.

We walked. A streetlight that had fallen asleep lit up above us, as if suddenly woken up.

We faced each other. He was a fair, slender lad without a moustache and with lips that hid a little shyness. I tried to smile. But he lowered his face, out of shyness.

"What is it in your hand?" he asked

"A cat," I said.

Without lifting his face, he asked, "Where are you taking it?"

"To throw it away."

He lifted his face. Afraid to look him in the eye, I lowered my face. There was no need for me to do that. But at that moment, that was what I felt like doing.

"Where would you throw it away?"

"I don't know," I said

Then it cried.

"Poor cat," he said.

"Yes," I too said, "Poor thing."

Both of us stood silently for some time. When he saw the light of a vehicle approaching us, he suddenly pulled me aside behind a tree with him.

"Police," he whispered in my ears.

"So what?" I asked.

He didn't say anything. But, then his breath brushed my face.

The cat cried in my hands.

"Would the police hear?" I asked him

"Sometimes..." before he could finish that sentence, he closed my mouth. His hands had the smell of talcum powder. Held close to my lips, those hands were soft as a kitten.

When the jeep passed, he took his hands away. I looked at him. He also looked at me. We laughed.

He took the cage out of my hands and opened it. Tiredly, it looked out. It saw me. It saw the stars in the sky. It looked at him with a familiar face. Then it cried with love. He caressed it.

"My wife doesn't like cats," I told him guiltily.

"And you?" he queried. I nodded. Then I looked at his eyes. In those little, naughty, kitten-eyes, there was a smile.

"What is his name?" he asked

"No name," I said.

"Shall I take him?" he asked hugging him.

I gave him consent with my eyes.

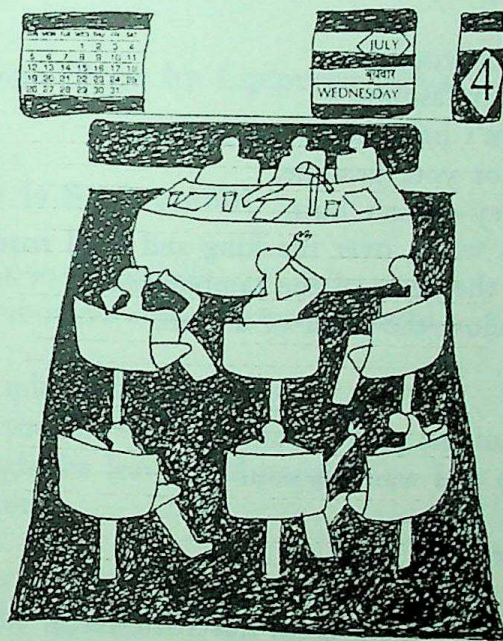
"What is your name?" he asked

"Chandran," I said

Giving the cat a kiss, he asked me, "Shall I call him Chandran?"

A firefly flew by between us.

Translated from Malayalam by C.S.Venkiteswaran



Shankar 03

Songs of the Juanga People

The Juanga people inhabit northern Orissa, and the following translations have been based on the songs of people of Juanga community living in Keonjhar district. They use Oriya script, and have about 1000 indigenous words of day-to-day use, not found in standard Oriya language. Besides, they use phonetically morphed Oriya words. Juanga songs have rich literariness about them, and the lines often follow a distinct rhyming pattern with plenty of musical alliteration.

I Sing This Song for You, My Sweet Jasmine

I sing this song for you,
 Raimalli, My Sweet Jasmine,
 so that time doesn't hang heavy on you.
 I sing this song for you, Jasmine,
 so that the journey doesn't hurt,
 the journey from work, over the long and hard road.
 As you dance to the beats of the tambourine,
 your footsteps follow the track of a crab.

I promise myself
 that you will tread the path I wait on;
 I hold my breath and wait on your path,
 Girl. Everyday.
 Your heart is hard and hurts,
 Raimalli!
 Like the dry-roasted yellow gram hurts the teeth.
 Your movement is swift like water,
 and inevitably rushes towards me.
 My gaze
 sharp as a knife
 is pointed at you.
 And I will always keep my eyes peering
 on you.

Do come to me furtively, Girl,
 Like a hare sneaks into the antique roots
 of enormous ancient trees.
 If you do not come,
 our relationship will reach a dead end,
 My Raimalli,
 like the *Kukuchi* flower,
 that blossoms and withers away in the wilderness.
 When we meet, Raimalli,
 we will hunt and kill a large sambar on the way back,
 and cook its meat.
 We will hum innumerable songs
 like tubers proliferate clandestinely beneath
 the earth,
 beneath the cave-like foliage of the tuber bushes,
 and let our joyous union take place
 in crevices and corners.

Translated from Oriya by Lipipuspa Nayak

Our Hamlet Is So Beautiful

Our hamlet is so beautiful!
 It entralls our mind and enchants our soul.

The dawn is splendidly clean, and
 The glow of the Sun god
 glistens through the leaves and boughs,
 shrubs and trees.

When the sun begins to set,
 the old and the aged gather at the village common house,
 at the centre of our hamlet
 and discuss life and its sundry concerns.

Young boys and girls
 come out on the village road winding through the houses
 To sway and sing songs.

The mothers and aunts of the village
gather at one place
and weave mats of date-palm leaves.

The children rend the skies
with the chatter
and prattle of street games
at the twilight hour.

Translated from Oriya by Lipipuspa Nayak

You Forgot Me

I had seen you
under the soft and tender radiance of the evening sky.
You had given me your words: 'I'll not forget you.'
You found a new companion.
You forgot me.
Perhaps it is normal to forget your old sweetheart,
when you have a new mate.
It is normal too, O girl,
that your promise should turn into betrayal.

You had promised me hope,
yet what I got is hopelessness,
though I sang for you in all faithfulness.

You had called me your life and soul,
and then sank in the watery rapids of falsehood and deceit,
my little boat.
Even in this world of illusory relationships
people all over will sneer at us
and my love for you will remain
a nightmare and a trance.

My girl, my love for you
is true;
But you made it look false,
for reasons selfish.

You made of me an imbecile and idiot,
I'll never ever again go by your words.
Your true and false promises,
have banished me
to the world of eternal punishment,
and I will never ever believe you again for aeons.

Translated from Oriya by Lipipuspa Nayak

Songs of the Gond People

The Gond people reside throughout Orissa. Their language and religion are very similar to that of the rest of the people of Orissa. They live in larger numbers in the south-western part of Orissa. Lord Shiva and Lord Jagannath are their tutelary deities. Their languages differ across the western part of Orissa to various degrees. Some of their songs are also common to others, who do not belong to the community, yet live in the area. In some areas their literacy level is very high.

My Sweet, Sweetheart

You secrete the fragrance of blooming jasmines,
because you are a blooming jasmine yourself.
When you see me at a distance,
you spare a coy half smile.
When you see the bumblebee,
you break into peels of laughter.
But when I come close to you,
you walk away and squat at a distance.
Now tell me, why do you go so far away,
did anyone tell you anything terse or sarcastic?
Do not sulk,
reveal it to me *rasarkeli re*,
my sweet, sweetheart.

There she is waiting on a slab of stone,
with the sole intention
of meeting you secretly.

O sweetheart,
 this side is blue and that side is red
 If you do not love me,
 then go and stay as a manservant,
 in the house where there is a young wife of an old Master.

What a treacherous man you are,
 had I known this, I would never have married you.

Translated from Oriya by Lipipuspa Nayak

I Am Getting Breathless Sweetheart

I am getting breathless, sweetheart, my *Sajani*,
 Who is it that has grabbed
 the homemade spherical cake of puffed rice?
 Our brothers have made friends
 with each other, dear,
 we eat curry from the same quarter-bowl,
 my life is yours
 and we are inseparable.
Sajani, my soul-mate,
 the date-palm by the path stands tall!
 Its fruits have ripened well
 I have a mind
 to pluck them all.
 There, *Sajani*, the pleated dhoti in white;
 the pure and sacred
 There, a bottle of perfume lies underneath,
 dear, the visitor soaks himself with the perfume.
Sajani

He knows how to howl
 in a small place like the school.
 If there is a racket in the forest,
 the big sahib slips away and he gets caught
 Just imagine how great is his heart.
Sajani, dear

The river water flows with *bhukubhuku* sound
If I do not see my sweetheart for a minute,
my heart throbs *dukhudukhu*.

Sajani left, the bicycle disappeared
The boy put *mehndi* on your palms, *Sajani* and
took you away
But we lost our mind, *Sajani*
to the North-Indian man from Sinapali.

Translated from Oriya by Lipipuspa Nayak

Everything Reminds Me of You

The silk cotton tree has burst into crimson flowers,
just the way you look.
When I whisper something without any sense
you smile with a strange coyness.
But when I speak a few words
you get angry, retreat and sulk inside your house.
Well, let me wait till the winter months
of festivities when the time for wedding comes,
we will see what is in your mind.

Tell me what is it, sweetheart,
reveal to me your sweetness.
One day you smile at me,
and on the next day you sulk
and refuse to talk,
I'm confused
Tell me what it is all about!

Translated from Oriya by Lipipuspa Nayak

Someone Has Said Something to You

Looks like
someone has said something to you, my friend,
and, you are splitting with happiness.
Tell me, Girl, what it is.
you come running to me when you see me
and even make my bed;
but you do not come to my bed.

Now tell me what it is
all about.
Rasarkeli, the Ecstatic Woman!
The date-palm is so sweet!
When you speak
your words are sweet as the fruit.
The fruit tastes sweet if you suck its juice.

I sucked on the whole fruit up to the seed,
But towards the end, it was acrid.

Like a spinning plaything you come spiralling near me, and
chuckle impishly
as I am finally vanquished
by the last bitter drop of juice.

Translated from Oriya by Lipipuspa Nayak

KINSPEOPLE FROM FAR AND NEAR

Steven Grieco

The Painter's Portrait

Before setting to his work
the painter of this image should remember:
Who is he portraying? and reflect
how the narrow corridor through this world of chance
lies strewn with breakable misery of fear,
and violent mishap
and manholes' unforeseen falls:

for clearly
likeness of an illustrious predecessor,
or even all humankind unlocking
into one simultaneous flower
are not what lies in his heart of hearts;

but considering
that he may no longer be shielded
from thought of accident,
he knows the only way to be the way forward—
the whole form:

thus he will do his work in the best manner,
and accomplish what he had always striven for,
knowing this entangled
between waking dream and recognition;

and play down mere individual traits
putting features surprisingly where they should go,
much as meaning arises
out of words that sleep - like the city at night

resembling itself, intently,
outside the window engulfed in darkness.

So that his image may finally be expressed.

Then the painter will not only
have rendered cheek-bones and shading,
not only conjured light in the eyes.

His portrait will be memory itself.

"Intellect Is the Swiftest of Birds"

This study of birds in the light,

arising from within
without claim, swift dark gliders
over water; or the unhurried, vast-winged,

and others' brilliant circles in the sun

Only their appearing grasps itself,
too light and dark
what ignites their images
that reel skyward
non-ignited, ungrieving

in twos, threes,
they hold -

such change, and stillness:

never plunging beyond
themselves

What the Mountain Stream
Told the Road Maintenance Engineers
After Causing Mudslides, Broken Roads
and Loss of Life

See, down there, at the bottom of the slope,
where I've hurled your vehicles, twisted and broken:
there flows the River Bhagirathi, shadowless
through the light and dark of existence.

For millions of years it, too, has had to dig its bed
further and further into the rock's live heart.
See the great winding valley it has carved,
how it descends down from the horizon of giants.

I don't dream of achieving anything like that.
My simple instinct is to probe in the dark, to burrow
with pure glacier water through pebbles and loose earth
after you have buried me underground.

I only wish to find the air and light again. To rejoin
that moving, lucid sash—birthright of all rivers.

The Reader and the Poet

1. The Reader

At first I thought:
had you at least added a flourish,
a curl to the letters,
and said, all is right with the trees,
and the bliss of birds living off the air.
Things are ok...

But not this constant, prolific,
unseemly production, like rain
that brings the slugs in hundreds
out the muddy hillside.

Ironic, average, unlovely.
We looked away in boredom.

But then your thread turned brilliant, obscure;
poet, I can only try to imagine you: walk
up to you, fell you with one stroke
for your cursed deception.

You,
disjoined from what you never belonged to,
trussed up like a cripple
in your concepts - and
my silence.

What you said came again and again
from all sides, with the speed of words
and their truth, the shining
of everything other, everything
opposite

till I rose and fused with you. We became the poem.

But all this was never yours:
your endless fall through the branches of becoming,
its ramifications and breathless eye-contact,
your inverted vision of Beauty—
were never yours.

In truth,
you are only that desperate
hunter-image of your own making,
that hounds you and leaves you no reward.

Not even the form.

Not even that is yours.

2. The Poet

How is it that "paradise" has come
before? with all its concealed foliage,
a strange sort of past!

...as an ocean of things might lie in a pin-point
or had never been – never before;
ah, yes, intangible: that very other enclosure,
and all its clustering embryos of grief.

Some miracle must lurk there...the leaf
and the flower, day and night that forever transmute
into a single block of gold;
a two-pronged
world, like the flashing inner folds
of beggar-cloth that I never saw,
for I had stumbled
into a ruinous sleep when I lost the way;
and then layer
upon layer, eon upon creeping eon,
all around me the features lengthened,
grew disfigured, repulsive,
drowning.

You and I were split apart.

Reader,
every night in the first descending dream
I am startled back to the vigil of hunt,
lines whose sense I cannot grasp.

But I have learnt patience from the rower
who rows backwards in his boat.

As he glides through some thick-leaved depths,

he knows they can be only future—

a touching again, like whispering fronds,

a moulding,
far heavier than this world,

of what you and I now express as void.

A “paradise” we never owned,
never even imagined.

Steven Grieco / 109

South of Chowwara
(the netherworld)

I awake to find you gone.
You stand over me, and smile,

and again we both know you have gone.

My deepest discovering shadow.

In every direction is a crystal that breaks into blackness.

You whisper, "let it break... the black way is equally
luminous..."

till I stumble
and fall into the night
innocent indeed

where a goldsmith
hammers, hammers the light

I turn to look at you,
and again we both know you've gone.

There is no epiphany but ourselves;
the echoing of life in an empty chamber.

Revenge of Shakuni

Gonesh Gogoi

Act-I

Scene I

(Somewhere in the battlefield; dusk hour; with a vindictive look of a hungry lion, enter Shakuni)

Shakuni : Can my persistent efforts go futile? Can the earth enduring such decline of rights? My abiding perseverance is about to bear fruit. Duryodhana, you are the emperor, sovereign monarch and I'm a pauper, living in your bounty. You are the eldest of one hundred alive, and I'm the youngest of one hundred ghosts! Such a sharp contrast is gulping us, yet we are so close to each other! You are my closest nephew; I'm your counsellor beloved uncle! *[looking fiercely]* I don't have to wait for long. Touching the horizon the blaze is roaring; it draws the moths to their tragic end. None can desist it; no one can resist it.

(With a veena in hand singing a ballad, enter a bard)

SONG

Enchanting the universe
what a melody is wafting in the air!
Vying with the vast, slowly and slowly
that unceasing, peerless tune floats by.
The captivated celestial beings

forget to radiate.
 Time too stops; joy knows no bounds
 listening to the tune.
 The enthralled universe
 by all means of proclamations
 declares that destiny wins.

- Shakuni : How stupid, blood is flowing in streams and you are playing flute? Death is hot on the heels of one and all opening its jaw and you are pouring in melodies? Nay, you're just! Go ahead; celebrate it! Hastinapur is about to be razed; Duryodhana is counting his days; Kuru dynasty is faltering. Such a great pleasure, it must be celebrated grandly—*(about to leave; enter Sailya)*
- Sailya : Uncle, uncle what celebration are you talking about?
- Shakuni : I'm talking of celebrating our victory grand!
- Sailya : Victory?
- Shakuni : Why, by driving the Pandava running for life did not Guru make us proud today?
- Sailya : The preceptor is no more, uncle. Dhristadyumnya killed him. We are defeated.
- Shakuni : I appreciate your charming wit, Sailya.
- Sailya : I didn't speak in a lighter vein, uncle. I'm serious.
- Shakuni : Serious! Ah, how terrible a news it is! Dronacharyya is no more! The Kaurava is defeated! What am I hearing! Ah-ah-ah *(breaks down in grief)*
- Sailya : What is the point of despairing?
- Shakuni : Despairing, what despairing are you talking of Sailya! I'm ruined; my heart is shattered. I apprehend something very grave! What a news you broke to me Sailya, what a terrible news!
- Sailya : Please don't be nervous, don't lose your cool, uncle. If you do, to whom will Duryodhana turn for counsel?
- Shakuni : *(rising)* You're right, Sailya. I should not break down at this critical juncture. We still stand a good chance; we are still a formidable force. *(pause)* I understand now, yes, now I can make out! It is not the game of might alone; something beyond the might is playing beneath it all. It has to be. Let it be. We will also see.

You're the only dependable one left with us to lead and protect us now. You're neither the indulgent grandsire Bhishma of the Pandavas nor Drona, the partisan preceptor of Arjuna. You're Sailya. I'm sure you will succeed.

Sailya : Uncle, within a day I can make the Kauravas victorious by teaching the Pandavas a lesson for their lives. But....

Shakuni : No, no; there can't be any ifs and buts. No one can be trusted, Sailya; no one can be relied upon. Duryodhana's prestige depends on you, Sailya. Please give me your word, would you?

Sailya : (*proudly*) Just try me uncle. I have been only watching so far, but not any more. Once I take over command, listen uncle, I will rout the Pandavas.

Shakuni : No doubt about it, you can; you can; you can.

Sailya : But what about Karna? If Maharaja prefers him to be the general?

Shakuni : Karna! Is Karna also a hero? Ah, forget him! Come; come with me! (*aside*) You fool, you're also a moth, your end is also drawing near. (*both exit*).

Act-I

Scene - II

(*A park near the Pandava camp. Enter Krishna and Arjuna*)

Arjuna : A retreat in the forest is a far better choice, Yadupati.
Krishna : I share your views. In the seclusion of forest recesses one is far away from the troubles, hustle and bustle of a common life; far away from your tedious statecraft. Forest is always serene, always very peaceful. That is why the world-weary sages resort to the forest seeking peace; they prefer the forest to the hamlets for their hermitage.

Arjuna : Then what is the use of killing kith and kin?

Krishna : It is for no good.

Arjuna : Then let the Kurukshetra war stop here and now.

Krishna : My friend, Kurukshetra war has slipped from your hand.

Gonesh Gogoi / 113

- Arjuna : Why?
- Krishna : Might be to uphold the dharma.
- Arjuna : What dharma you find glorified in this, Yadupati!
This is madness, indiscriminate killing, destruction of
the dynasty; a massacre!
- Krishna : Yes, my friend, to uphold the glory of dharma this
massacre is the need of the hour.
- Arjuna : Slaying of our loving grandsire; the revered guru;
countless unknown weak and innocent ones, is that
dharma, Yadupati?
- Krishna : Attempted disrobing of the Sati in public, beastly
killing of the defenceless teenager in an unequal battle
besieged by seven well-armed generals; tell me what
glory of humanity was glorified, Falguna!
- Arjuna : O Madhava! Please, please for heaven's sake don't
instigate us.
(*enter Bhima*)
- Bhima : It is not the question of instigation, Arjuna, it is a
kshatriya's righteous anger.
- Arjuna : Please, brother, please, calm down.
We tainted our hands with grandsire's blood
who raised us orphans!
We stained our hands with the preceptor's blood
from whom we learnt the craft of warfare.
Why more?
- Bhima : Let me think it over!
- Arjuna : Please, take a fresh look.
Out of the clan of hundred, only two are left.
On their life hangs our reign.
Reigning on their ashes
why should we set out for hell?
Destroying our own lineage,
why should we lose this birth and the next?
- Krishna : Brikodara, you can't discount this argument. It car-
ries a lot of weight. The kingdom can't be weighed
against the lineage.
- Bhima : Certainly not, I agree with you.
- Krishna : But this feeling should be reciprocated. Ah, an un-
known charioteer's son can be made a monarch
without even thinking about it twice; when the turn
came for the cousins, the pleading met with a flat

refusal to concede the legitimate claim of birth right,
that too even limited to five hamlets.

Bhima
Krishna

: Krishna, don't drive me mad.

: I'm provoking none, Brikodara, I just refer to the sanctity of a kshatriya's vow. No kshatriya must fail his vows. One must uphold what one vowed. The vows of Brikodara, the vows of Arjuna are to be honoured as yet. That audacious Duryodhana who dared to urge Panchali publicly to sit on his thighs he exposed to insult her, is still at large. Panchali is yet to tie her hair hanging loose, keeping her vow; Dushasana and the proud Karna are still alive, (*hurriedly exit*)

Arjuna
Bhima

: Yadupati, Yadupati (*exit*)

: Arjuna, Arjuna,
Let wisdom, civility, ethics and code
go to four winds.
Come what may,
I stand to redeem my oath. (*exit*)

Act I Scene - III

Karna's Palace

(*Karna enters the scene visibly disturbed*)

Karna
Padmaa
Karna

: Padmaa—Padmaa—Padmaa—(*enter Padmaa*)

: My dear!

Padmaa

: (*coming closer*) My ill-fated lady, would you be interested in the secret behind my life?

: Secret? What are you talking of? I'm baffled, what has troubled you today? Karna I'm not at all disturbed, dear; I'm fully composed. Do you know, who I'm?

Padmaa

: You're my husband, my best guru and my lord supreme.

Karna
Padmaa

: What else do you know?

Karna

: I'm content with what I know.

Padmaa

: Listen dear; I was an outcaste once—

Karna

: Yes, I know.

: No, you don't; I was the son of a charioteer. But

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- today I became the son of Mother Kunti, the eldest Pandava.
- Padmaa : Please don't ridicule me.
- Karna : Ridicule! No Padmaa, this is what it is. Today at dawn Mother came to the bank of Yamuna and confided to me: "You're not born to Radha. You're my first child, my eldest son."
- Padmaa : O' God! Your dalliance knows no limit. How merciful you're!
- Karna : It is not mercy, Padmaa, it is deceit. Else, while my young age was ruined bearing the wrath of sages in curse for a sin I had nothing to do with, why I should learn, just before the setting of my sun, of the exalted lineage of my birth—to the great empress?
(Padmaa stands stupefied)
Selfish, selfish
deceitful, deceitful
the whole world is self-centred
beyond words.
- Padmaa : Oh, dear—
- Karna : Listen Padmaa. Ever since I began the world With the stigma of alleged lowly birth When I underwent untold suffering where was this mother then? Scorning my lowly parentage Dronacharyya taunted me and refused to accept me as his student in weaponry. I was so abhorrent! And on her *swayamvar* day when Draupad's daughter casting aspersions about my birth was corrosively abusive refusing to give a chance to a charioteer's son as a suitor, why then didn't revel this glorious motherhood? And today—
- Padmaa : My dear, please don't recall the agonizing past. I fail to comprehend

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y at
and
ou're

mer.

why such a truth was
hidden so long.

Karna

: Mystery, Padmaa, mystery.
For guarding her honour
the mystery of my noble birth was kept
guarded.

Padmaa

: What is the secret about?

Karna

: Listen, Padmaa
When my mother was a maiden
she gave me birth
through the blessings of the Sun-god
To remain immaculate
the only course left
for that mortally terrified mother
was to treat the newborn like a doll—
without even casting a backward glance
take him to the river and float him away!

Padmaa

: She set the newborn afloat!

Karna

: Why not, else her maidenhood was at stake.

Padmaa

: Oh God! How cruel a mother can be to sacrifice
motherhood for femininity—

Karna

: Stop it, Padmaa, stop it; she is my mother despite,
the goddess I hold in highest esteem.

Padmaa

: What would be your stand now?

Karna

: I don't aspire to the crown or throne.
I take pride at my lowly birth.
I may belong to an illustrious lineage.
Let the Pandava be my common blood
but just as I proclaimed earlier
Duryodhana is my lone brother and friend
I will never change even for a hair's breadth.

Act-I

Scene - IV

(War cabinet room of the Kauravas. A dejected Duryodhana enters; Shakuni and Dushasana follow.)

Shakuni

: Why should you be so demoralised? Yes Bhishma and
Drona were men-at-arms, but were very partisan. If
not, how could Bhishma like master of arms managed

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ood?

ast.

- to stand only ten days and that archer master Drona survived just five days of war? What has happened is good for us. You are well rid of these partisans. We haven't become weak at their loss. Look for a worthy one, an able one to command our legion, Duryodhana; stride, stride ahead. Be quick, act, act; this is not the time to sink in thoughts, Duryodhana.
- Duryodhana : Where is the room for that luxury, uncle? I just fail to comprehend what makes the Pandavas so formidable. What is behind Arjuna's success in destroying a large army of mine?
- Dushasana : It is not the question of might, brother; it is conspiracy. They engineered the fall of Guru by spreading the rumour of Aswatthama's death. Behind the shield the eunuch Shikhandi's body provided, Arjuna deceitfully shot at Grandfather taking advantage of his nobility.
- Shakuni : I agree with your assessment, Dushasana. The Pandavas are not that strong as to deal with stalwarts like Bhishma and Drona. It is through deceit that they achieved it.
- Duryodhana : Let them plot, let them conspire, as much as they can. I will frustrate their evil designs. With Angaraj in the lead, I will try, uncle, and see how far Pandavas can go on matching our might. I will also try and see how diplomatic, how articulate could be that mastermind cowherd.
- Shakuni : Karna is not also that free of the cloud of suspicion. Duryodhana! Who knows what colour he might exhibit once he became the commander! What you will do then? (*enter Karna*)
- Karna : Then, then the sun will miss its orbit. Uncle, virtue has not debased itself to its nadir, right has not declined to that extent. Values and virtues are still cherished. I may be born to a charioteer
I may be an untouchable,
but, as the nearest and dearest one
whose shoulder
once I put my arm around,
hundreds of Kurukshetras,

thousands of Pandavas
even millions of Devaki's sons
can't sever this tie
of fraternity and friendship.

Duryodhana : I discovered you, my friend, there is no room for any probe.

That is why I planned to levy you
as my most trusted general.

Dushasana, release the decree to the troops,
under Angaraj's proven command
we will retaliate soon.

Brother, if another spell of defeat is awaiting
too—

Dushasana : Impossible.

No force can stop us this time,
none can match our might.

Facing Karna in single combat
Krishna and Arjuna will see stars,
mortally terrified.

And Bhima! What does he think of himself?

When he will see my best

he will realise who I am!

Bhima swore to drink my blood!

Ha ha ha,

Fool, killing a petty Rakshasa
you surpassed your limit!

He will drink my blood,

Ha ha ha. (*exit*)

Shakuni : My dear Duryodhana, a strategy is striking me, can we not devise a way to eliminate that crook Krishna? He is the strategist of the Pandavas. If he can be tackled...I hope you got my point?

Karna : Please, please, uncle, no more devious means. In an unmatched, unfair war we killed Abhimanyu. But it made them more resolute rather than weakening them.

Duryodhana : Enemy is enemy after all, my friend. Nothing is wrong in war.

Karna : My friend,
Please don't taint this
otherwise holy Kurukshetra field

by resorting to foul play.
 Resorting to unfair means
 no force has ever won.
 Armed with such a large army,
 it is not befitting that you,
 the mighty emperor,
 to tackle the Pandavas
 through crooked means.
 If you do,
 rest assured, it will nail the coffin
 of this illustrious race.

Duryodhana : *(pause)* You're right.
 Since my teenage
 what-all designs had I not made
 to eliminate them,
 but still they not only thrived but flourished.
 In a futile attempt
 I tried to torch them alive,
 poisoned their food
 and what not—
 but all the designs failed.
 Yes, my friend,
 let my legions
 storm into the fray.
 We will be unfair to none.
 Duryodhana is neither a coward nor a weakling.
 Karna and Dushasana with him, he is formidable
 still. *(exit)*

Karna : That is the spirit. A kshatriya must not depart from
 kshatriya dharma; in the fair game of war, he receives
 either victory or death, with equal grace *(exit)*.

Shakuni : Today you're preaching for fair play and chivalry!
 Today only you find time for that justice. When you
 are in difficulty you remember them indeed! Incredible,
 Duryodhana, incredible! At times even devil is
 also capable of quoting scriptures! All these days what
 have you been practising, my dear? When I cast the
 doctored dice, where did you lock away your integrity?
 While disrobing the menstruating Draupadi,
 when humanity was about level with the ground,
 where did your sense of human grace relax! When my

old father and ninety-nine elders howled for a handful of food languishing in your dark cell, why did humanity not flash in you! Now you proclaim propriety, humane grace, probity. Ha ha ha (*exit*)

Act I
Scene V

Dhritarashtra's room. Dhritarashtra is sitting on his bed; Gandhari stands nearby

Dhritarashtra : He is not prepared to listen to me, Rani, he doesn't.
Gandhari : Why not? My son might be a stubborn one, but he is not imprudent. You're his father. He will certainly obey you, Maharaja.

Dhritarashtra : You can also do the same; you're his mother. If the son can be obedient to his father he can't defy his mother too.

Gandhari : I tried. I left no stone unturned to make him realize, counselled him, even implored; but all efforts were futile.

Dhritarashtra : Do you mean to say I have lagged behind in that effort? Do you mean to accuse me to be half-hearted in my attempts? So many times I gave him fatherly guidance like to an infant—stop this fight; my son, stop this. They are not aliens; they are our own blood, his cousins. Nay, without making any response to my counsel, silently he departed each time with a long face. He did not respond to my pleas.

Gandhari : I'm not inclined to believe, Maharaja.

Dhritarashtra : What! (*alighting from the bed*) what do you decline to believe, Gandhari?

Gandhari : What you've just said.

Dhritarashtra : My son is disobedient; and you too are, Gandhari. You seemed to take pity on me for my blindness, for my infirmity of old age.

Gandhari : Don't feign innocence, Maharaja. As the grandsire of the Kuru dynasty you are mostly to be blamed for this Kurukshetra war.

Dhritarashtra : Punish me, Rani, punish me. You're the empress; you're the king's mother. You have every right to sentence the convict.

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Gandhari : Who can stand unperturbed at the untimely sad demise of my hundred sons except the two? To that stonehearted father what penalty can a lady inflict, Maharaja?

Dhritarashtra : You asked me to mourn my children's death, Rani? I did mourn; long before, I did it. On that day itself, when you, the mother, the epitome of universal kindness, mercilessly delivering blows at the divine foetus with an iron mace reduced that to a lump, in that instant itself, *Rani*, in that very instant, I stood stupefied in horror of the eroding motherhood, pain-stricken. I consumed that pain of a bereaved father ever since. Now my eyes fall dry; it emptied all on that day itself. My stream of love has now fallen dry exposing the pebbles lying on its bed. (*Gandhari stands like a statue in anger and pain.*) (*placating her*)
Gandhari, Gandhari—

Gandhari : (*with trembling voice*) Maharaja—

Dhritarashtra : I'm an aged, weary, senile man. My wisdom is destroyed. What I uttered just now was not what I intended; please forgive me, Rani.

Gandhari : Duryodhana is coming this way.

Dhritarashtra : Is he, is he? Rani, my head is reeling. I can't stand; guide me to my bed, please escort me to my bed. (*Gandhari escorts Dhritarashtra to his bed; he lies down, Gandhari stands near by. Enter Duryodhana, touches his mother's feet, then of Dhritarashtra's. He is indifferent*)

Duryodhana : *Ai*, did you send for me?

Gandhari : Yes, I did.

Duryodhana : Why did you call me, *Ai*? (*Gandhari is silent*) what happened? What are you so silent about?

Gandhari : Nothing.

Duryodhana : Oh, I'm relieved. *Ai*, why did you call me? Learning you were looking for me I rushed from the front.

Gandhari : But...will you listen?

Duryodhana : Did you ever, ever find me disobedient, *Ai*?

Gandhari : Then stop this fight. I lost everything. Now I'm left with you and Dushasana only. Arrest further misfortunes befalling the race. Stop this war, my son; stop this.

- Duryodhana : Stop this war; stop this war! *Ai*, why are you after this?
- Gandhari : Why I'm after this? The agony of a bereaved mother is beyond words to make you to feel what it is. I groomed one hundred lads in mirth and merriment. I am in bereavement of ninety-eight of them at their prime. They filled my heart with joy, which is now deserting it. How much more I have to bear? Duryodhana, obey my words—stop this fight.
- Duryodhana : If I call off the war
tell me, *Ai*, will my younger siblings
return to life?
If I stop this war
can I alter what is destined?
- Gandhari : None can shape destiny,
it will follow its course.
Before the blaze you started
reduces my home to ash
douse it.
Douse it—it is not too late.
- Duryodhana : The blaze
that engulfed my dear younger ones,
the blaze that
consumed my comrades-in-arms,
let it roar.
Either my foe will be drawn to it,
else I shall myself perish,
happily embracing a Kshatriya death.
- Gandhari : Don't defy your mother, my son.
- Duryodhana : *Ai*, please don't make me a sinner
I know your words are gospel.
But I'm helpless *Ai*.
This is not a mere fight for ancestral right.
What I led myself into
has now slipped off from me.
I can't return, even if I willed
until it meets its own destiny.
- Gandhari : The Pandavas expect only five hamlets.
For the sake of peace
why don't you part with them?
Yudhisthira is very kind

Bhima and Arjuna too are not obstinate.
If you negotiate peace
they will cordially assent.

Duryodhana : Peace? Peace with the Pandavas!

Gandhari : What is wrong in it?

Duryodhana : Nothing is wrong. But *Ai*,
peace was not something
for which I threw the challenge.
For this peace
countless warriors
setting aside their love for life
and their family alike
had driven themselves to jump into the fray
ready for the supreme sacrifice
like blind followers.

Mother, I have an illustrious lineage,
I'm a sovereign emperor.

For the fear of life
like a coward

you want me to resign myself today
at the Pandavas' feet!

Never, never.

Listen mother, you're my deity revered
and on that bed retires my father,
the god I adore

(shocked, Dhritarashtra sits on the bed).

I shall repeat what I've resolved—
without the war

I will never part with
even an inch of land
till I breathe my last.

If it is destined,
let my golden Hastina
be razed to the ground;
if it's destined,

I'm ready to face
dire consequences, *(about to leave hurriedly)*

Dhritarashtra : *(in a resolute voice)* My son!

Duryodhana : Father!

Dhritarashtra : I bless you, my son; be victorious.

- Duryodhana : Bless me father that I don't go adrift from the path you've shown.
- Gandhari : *(suddenly)* And if defeated?
- Duryodhana : *(bowing with a smile)* I'm your son, *Ai*, I have the courage to face death.

Act - II

Scene -1

(Somewhere in the battlefield. Yudhisthira and Sahadeva)

- Yudhisthira : Brother, although we are victorious today we have to be more cautious from now onwards. Karna is a formidable foe. He might have fled today, but it will be a blunder on our part to assess him low on this account.
- Sahadeva : May he be a formidable one! However mighty the Kaurava could be, only we will have the last laugh.
- Yudhisthira : Carried away by such an estimate I too accepted their challenge. It upsets me, even I repent at times, killing our kith and kin; what are we up to?
- Sahadeva : Penance for sins, penalty for offenders is the prevailing order. Why should we be repenting?
- Yudhisthira : Sahadeva, except for Duryodhana, the rest are not that offending. They just carried out his orders. Subjects are decree-bound to obey royal commands.
- Sahadeva : No wise and sane subjects should submit to the vicious commands of their masters.
- Yudhisthira : You're partly true.
- Sahadeva : That dirty strategist Shakuni has engineered all these. Inciting the ego in Duryodhana he only provoked him to war. So long as he lives this war will not end. *(pause)* I'm tired; may I take leave of you now?
- Yudhisthira : Yes, you proceed, you're tired. *(exit Sahadeva) (Aside)*. Oh God, you're omnipotent, omnipresent and omniscient; you're the creator, you're the protector and you're the destroyer of all. Where are you leading your ignorant sons, my lord? *(enter Bhima and Arjuna)*
- Arjuna : Brother, Duryodhana's greatest ally Karna fled from the battlefield today.

- Yudhisthira : Yes, I got that pleasant news.
- Bhima : It may be that anticipating such a grand feat Duryodhana rewarded Karna the throne of Anga well in advance. (*Yudhisthira and Arjuna are amused*)
- Arjuna : But brother, we can't but applaud the patience and resolution of Duryodhana. He is still resolved; still remains obstinate.
- Yudhisthira : Well, as a human being and as a monarch, Duryodhana is a criminal; but as a kshatriya and Kuru king, he is well within his rights.
- Bhima : That confidence will shake, and that heroism too will fade.
- Yudhisthira : How?
- Bhima : (*showing his mace*)
- Yudhisthira : Yes, I have faith in it.
- Arjuna : Similarly Kurupati too has profound faith in Karna.
- Yudhisthira : He has not reposed his faith on an unworthy one, Falguna.
- Arjuna : Might be a worthy one. But, if he flees like this, how long that faith will persist? Only time will tell.
- Bhima : I apprehend that Karna will be a terror this time. No worthy warrior can swallow the infamy of defeat, Arjuna.
- Yudhisthira : I agree.
- Arjuna : We should not be worried about that, brother. Yadupati is with us. (*Enter Krishna*)
- Krishna : What your unarmed Yadupati can do, my friend? I'm yet to be strong enough to handle the mace from you brother (*to Bhima*) or the Gandiva from you (*to Arjuna*). Driven by those limitations only have I vowed to remain unarmed in this war.
- Yudhisthira : O Omnipotent, though thou art unarmed, even a little of thy limitless potency render us stronger.
- Krishna : Had I been that potent, I would have not run to you in fear of Jarasandha for rescue. Anyway, leave it; let us call it a day.
- Yudhisthira : Yes, yes, let us retire for the day.
- Bhima : We are also tired.
- Krishna : Then Bhima-Arjuna is beginning to get tired beyond heroic endurance. Tomorrow the degradation shall scale down to giddiness, the day after—

- Bhima : Karna can't exhaust us to the point of fainting, Yadupati.
- Krishna : But for how long?
- Bhima : That fugitive charioteer's offspring has no mettle to exhaust Brikodara to the point of fainting, Madhava. But that charioteer's son is in no way lesser than Jayadrath, brother.
- Bhima : What are you hinting at?
- Krishna : What I hint is that when a lesser known Jayadrath can make you senseless by the blows of his mace, think of Karna! He is well armed with potent divine arrows and Bijoy, the great Parashuram's bow.
- Bhima : Bijoy or Ajoy
I know not, Madhav;
I know not arrows of any potency;
with dreaded blows of this mace
if I blast
nothing will remain intact.
- Krishna : Dada can be very easily provoked. He is very sensitive.
- Bhima : This is not an outrageous outburst, Krishna. This is what I am.
- Krishna : I'm convinced, Brikodara is not the metal to be exhausted so easily, (*pointing to Arjuna*) but I have some doubt about my friend.
- Arjuna : Why?
- Krishna : Because you couldn't dispute.
- Arjuna : I don't want to argue.
I vie for war, for rival and victory.
Let Karna be armed with the Bijoy his guru gifted
I too have Gandiva which God gifted me.
Very thirsty it is, and restless.
It can't be calmed without Karna's blood.
- Bhima : My throat is parched too.
I'm after
Dushasana's blood. (*all depart*)
- Krishna : Come, come; your dream will be realised.

Act II

Scene II

(A room in the Kauravas' camp, Karna and Dushasana)

- Karna : Dushasana, I may fail in my maiden attempt, but my spirit will not.
- Dushasana : We have lost a large army, Maharaja.
- Karna : I agree. But Bhishma and Drona couldn't prevent it too.
- Dushasana : That is true, but Brother had and has such deep faith in your ability; he didn't have the same kind of faith in any one else. Just as a token of respect the others were made generals on seniority basis.
- Karna : I am not misusing that trust, Dushasana.
- Dushasana : I know it.
- Karna : The loss of the battle today, the loss of the army today, does not necessarily mean that the war is lost.
- Dushasana : If we have to submit to the Pandavas, it will disgrace our birth. Our hard-earned reputation of gallantry; our noble birth will mock at us.
- Karna : The Pandavas' winning the war is a dream and the Kauravas' defeat is a fantasy.
- Dushasana : Maharaja, just dream that day—dust-stained corpses of the Pandavas are lying scattered in the battle-ground; scavenging animals and birds are vying amongst themselves for their share of feast of the corpses. Wow! How wonderful it would be!
- Karna : You don't have to wait any longer for that cherished day, Dushasana. It is at your doorstep.
- Dushasana : It has to be. Duryodhana's and Dushasana's mace, Karna's bow and arrow and the timely counsel of our uncle; such a combination of skill and knowledge with sharp intellectual application is really incredible. That day must come. Please wait for a while, I shall inform my brother of your arrival. *(exit)*
- Karna : *(aside)* Krishna, you may be God in human disguise. But you can't play around Arjuna's death with divine succour. You can't protect him. *(enter Duryodhana, sad)* My friend.
- Duryodhana : Angaraj, I'm very pleased to learn of Pandava's defeat.

- Karna : Please don't censure me.
- Duryodhana : I'm not censuring you, I'm only appreciating your valour.
- Karna : (*with a little anger*) My friend!
- Duryodhana : What!
- Karna : Karna is still active.
- Duryodhana : Even an ordinary Kuru soldier will prefer to die rather than being labelled a fugitive, Maharaja.
- Karna : Kurupati, why do you speak thus to me?
- Duryodhana : O' my most precious commander, the renowned warrior, the Maharathi—this is what you deserve.
- Karna : Kauraveshwar, don't enrage Karna, please don't try his patience.
- Duryodhana : To frown upon, do you treat me as a weakling?
- Karna : I'm aware you're the mighty sovereign.
I'm aware, how powerful you're,
not a weakling.
So wealthy that
without thinking twice
you gifted a kingdom,
along with a huge treasure,
unsolicited to
a poor and helpless stranger.
But, for that grace
I will not tolerate this disgrace.
- Duryodhana : Then tell me
with what grace
Duryodhana can consume
that disgrace?
- Karna : What is that disgrace?
- Duryodhana : The disgrace of defeat,
the disgrace of the fleeing
of the Kaurava general.
One and all in the Pandava camp
bantering at my defeat, tainted.
Even a commoner obliquely refers
at the war skill of the exiled Pandavas.
The Kauravas' army lost its nerve
ran away helter-skelter
to save their lives.
A commoner abuses and ridicules me;

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his audacity in meeting with my eye,
with what grace
as the emperor
of such a vast empire
can I consume?

Karna : *(pause)* Maharaja, Maharaja,
this is enough
to comprehend your pain;
you're amply expressive.
It is now plain to me
I can read your agony clearly;
I can fathom your pain.
Don't be worried, Kurupati
the heartless, cruel destiny
caught me unawares and
turned my wheel of fortune
against my interest.
I will be more vigilant now. *(enter Sailya)*
I will not be governed by destiny any more.
I will set my own destiny.
Maharaja, give me an efficient charioteer.
Let me bring an end to this war.

Duryodhana : Madrapati, would you please volunteer?

Sailya : Royal decrees must be honoured.

Duryodhana : It is not a binding command, Raja; it is a request.

Sailya : Then I accept with grace.

Karna : Then Kurupati, just relax.

Don't be worried any more about the war.

Your countless sleepless nights

are about to be over. *(exit)*

Duryodhana : A storm has just built up, no one can stall it.
(Duryodhana and Sailya go out; enter Shakuni from the opposite side)

Shakuni : If there is might to stall that storm then what will
you do, Duryodhana, what will you be doing? Before
your eyes Bhishma had fallen; Dronacharyya died,
Karna fled; still you expect, "No one can resist, no
one can resist." You are blind; you are crazy, hoping
against hope you still expect to rout the Pandava, to
be victorious in the Kurukshetra war! This is a craze,
Duryodhana, nothing but craze. As long as your

blood is hot this craze will stay. One day that blood will cool down, chilled, when your veins will be relished on by the scavenging birds, then where that raving would be! Where will be your craze!!
(exit)

Act II

Scene III

(Battlefield. Mace in hand, enter the angry Bhima.)

Bhima : (looking inside) Pandava armies, Pandava armies, why are you running away, in fear of Karna? Cowards, dastards, look at me. Armed with the dreaded mace, I myself am the terror today. Nothing to be worried about, don't run away. That dirty low-caste has no nerve to touch us. (enter Karna).

Karna : Then why doesn't the offspring of Pandu, the excellent cook of Birata's palace, destroy us!

Bhima : You, dirty boot lick of the Kauravas, sinner, vile one, see, see your death has come to you.

Karna : (beaming a ridiculing smile looks at Bhima)

My lord of death,
if you wish, you can flee,
save your life.

Take my words—
your safe passage is guaranteed.

Bhima : Oh, if in my name
your terrified soul trembles,
then why did you accept the command?
To such an unworthy fellow
Parashuram should not have
handed over such a legendary bow!
Why did you accept the gift?

Karna : (ignoring Bhima, looking inside)
Yadupati, why are you avoiding me?
Turn your chariot,
come this way.
With this marked weapon in hand
I'm just waiting for Arjuna.

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- What, then you are evading me? (*looking inside*)
 Sailya, Sailya bring my chariot
 Forestalling his advancement.
 I will show Arjuna the way to the hell.
 (*about to leave*)
- Bhima : (*standing in Karna's way*) Where are you escaping,
 you vile one? Throwing dust in my eyes, do you
 expect to evade battle?
- Karna : O hero, neither do you know the mysteries
 nor can you comprehend.
 What compelled me to let you free,
 my easiest prey?
 Go away, go away
 mama's baby, go to your mother's lap. (*exit*)
- Bhima : You, cunning outcast
 I will not spare you today. (*exit; enter Dushasana
 from the opposite side*)
- Dushasana : A charge of rapture is surging through.
 As a petrified deer trembles, facing a lion
 my terrorised enemies are trembling.
 Oh! There they are, Karna and Yudhisthira
 locked in fierce fighting.
 Yudhisthira is inching back retreating,
 Angaraj, kill him, kill him, have no mercy.
 No mercy, no excuse of his being Dharmaraj. (*exit;
 enter Shakuni from the opposite side*)
- Shakuni : Right, Dushasana right, you are very right.
 There should not be any mercy, any excuse. There
 should not be any amnesty. O the gods in heaven and
 the human race, listen, listen, Dushasana utters—kill,
 kill. No mercy for Yudhisthira as the epitome of
 virtue. I agree; I too can't forgive him like my nephew
 and Kururaj. (*exit; from the opposite direction, Karna
 drags Yudhisthira, with his bow around his neck*)
- Karna : Dharmaraj, the icon of virtues.
 Now where is your valiant brother Brikodara?
 Where is your Khandava-famed
 great archer Dhananjaya?
 Leaving you helpless, vulnerable
 where fled your stepmother's sons?

Yudhisthira : To whom you sought refuge as saviour,
where is that crook Krishna, Devaki's son?
: Leave me, leave me; outcast,
challenging again
I shall teach you a lesson for life.

Karna : (*releasing Yudhisthira*) You are my death? Ha
ha ha. Dharmaraja; destiny is neither
insane nor a fool.
You may retire Maharaja,
I release you
at my sweet will.
If I so desired
I could have
chained and imprisoned you.
But I will not, as I promised to someone.
Karna has never ever breached
any vow he takes.
Mystery! Mystery is his life's essence.
(*about to leave, returning*)
Listen,
you are not the one I rival.
For single combat with Partha
I was surging ahead;
but you stood on the way.
Had you not intercepted
I would have not missed my prey.
You would have not also censured me in this way.
(*exit; in the opposite direction the blushed Yudhisthira
goes out*)

Act II

Scene IV

(*The Pandavas' Camp. As Draupadi was singing, midway Arjuna enters;
she stops singing*)

SONG

Why do I feel something ominous?
My heart is trembling
why is the melody doleful?

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Why is melancholy echoing all around?
 Why is the air heavy with
 a strange, doleful tune?
 The autumn dew
 that sits on plantain leaves
 instead of glinting—
 why do they appear as tears?

- Arjuna : Your melody can't soothe me today, Yagyaseni.
 Draupadi : Anything wrong, my love?
 Arjuna : We were defeated, our garrison suffered a great privation.
 Draupadi : Defeated? How come?
 Arjuna : When I was away locked with Aswatthama, Karna stormed his way through our phalanx invincibly, defeating all of us. Brikodara, Nakul and Sahadeva all ran for their lives. Dharmaraja tried his best to frustrate him tooth and nail, but failed.
 Draupadi : My beloved, don't worry about that; when all of you are safe, the Kauravas can't do any harm to us.
 Arjuna : May be. But how do I face Dharmaraja today? With what words do I console him? Ah, instead of locking with my guru's son, had I been thwarting Karna's moves today!
 Draupadi : What is the point in repenting? What has happened has happened.
 Arjuna : True, there is no point in repenting. But this success shall enthuse Duryodhana. Demoralised at repeated defeat since the very beginning, the Kaurava legions will be recharged by this victory.
 Draupadi : This accidental defeat can't demoralize our force. If right prevails, if the judgement of right and wrong is the prevailing order, then the greedy Duryodhana will definitely meet with a fateful end.
 Arjuna : Krishna, I hope your words come true.
 Draupadi : (*looking inside*) O, Dharmaraja has arrived.
 Arjuna : Has he? Then you go, attend to his needs.
 (*Draupadi goes out; enter Yudhisthira from the opposite direction*)
 Yudhisthira : Did you kill Karna, Arjuna?
 Arjuna : After an arduous battle with Aswatthama and

- Sangsaptaka's troops, I have returned just a while ago.
Then only I came to know about our plight.
- Yudhisthira : Then Karna is still alive? (*Arjuna stands stupefied*).
Why are you silent?
- Arjuna : (*in a broken voice*) Brother, Maharaja
- Yudhisthira : You worthless fellow, is it with this valour that you
vowed to eliminate Karna? That you swore to settle
scores with Duryodhana?
- Arjuna : (*with folded hands*) Brother, brother, please,
please calm down, you're like a father to me; I have
deep filial regards for you, brother.
Had I had the slightest hint
that the outcast might disgrace us
I would not have got locked elsewhere
willfully leaving him in the field.
- Yudhisthira : You shameless one, again tall claims!
No more lame excuses.
I will not buy your words any more.
That outcast
humiliated me in public,
and you, you the coward, the irresponsible one
leaving the battle aside
set out on an outing
since dawn.
- Arjuna : Brother, brother, I fall at your feet. Please
put an end to blaming me. (*about to touch his feet*)
- Yudhisthira : Go away from my sight,
you are the blackguard of the race.
With this king of valour, do you hold Gandiva?
If this is the potent Gandiva you boast of,
then it is of no avail;
throw it away,
we don't need such a useless weapon.
- Arjuna : (*in great anger*) Wh-at!
You underrate my Gandiva!
Then you pay for your foolishness. (*about to
hit Yudhisthira with a sword; enter Krishna and
stands in between*)
- Krishna : You fool,
who are you to decide
who will go and who will stay?

- In this transitory world
birth and death all are pre-ordained.
- Arjuna : Yadupati, Yadupati
anyone undermines my Gandiva,
casts affronts at it,
brother or guru, whoever he might be,
I've vowed to eliminate him. (*Krishna snatches the sword*)
- Krishna : Dharmaraja is elder to you,
a fatherly figure.
You're going to kill your Guru,
just to keep your pledge? Nay, Partha, better forget
your pledge.
- Arjuna : (*angrily*) Shall my vow then fail?
- Krishna : No, why should it be? (*pointing to Arjuna*)
Why don't you recall
what you pledged if you fail.
Then you are supposed to give in yourself.
- Arjuna : Yes, yes Yadupati
it slipped my attention (*bowing to Yudhisthira*)
Brother, brother,
the noble soul,
failing to offer myself at the altar
I was about to negate my worship;
please pardon me.
(*standing*) Don't worry Yadupati
shooting at my heart myself
flooding the altar with my blood
I will offer
my oblation,
I will keep my vow (*aiming the arrow at his chest*)
- Krishna : (*obstructing*) My champion of truth, don't push your
heroism to its acme. Committing suicide, please doesn't
disgrace your birth. Don't taint the Pandava camp
with the blood of its celebrity warrior, the conqueror
of the three worlds. If you are committed to truth,
exalt yourself. No worthy man extols his own merit.
Extolling one's merit equals the heinous act of suicide.
- Arjuna : (*pause*) Then let me extol my own merit, as you
desire, Yadupati.

Listen Dharmaraja,
 I'm Partha the man-at-arms,
 The one who defeated gods and demons alike.
 On Draupadi's *swayambhara* day,
 with these very arms
 I defeated countless valiant princes.
 Defeating the Trishuli in arm-wrestling,
 listen, listen Maharaja,
 I bagged the blessed Pashupat.
 And today too
 with Gandiva in hand
 I pledge in Madhav's presence
 challenging Radha's son
 in single combat
 I shall eliminate Karna from the earth.

Act II
 Scene V

(Battlefield. *Shakuni and Dushasana*)

- Shakuni : Dushasana, today is the day to prove your worth. You are the worthiest brother of Kururaj, the matching rival of Brikodara. With your dreaded blows with the mace smashing the skull of the demon Bhima, end his devilish conduct today.
- Dushasana : Do you have any doubt, uncle? Don't you know how mighty I am? At my name, Indra the Lord of the gods, trembles and Basuki faints terror-stricken; I am that potent. What qualities do you find in Bhima which are equal to the ones in me? (*enter Bhima*)
- Bhima : Bhima? He is not your equal, he is your Lord of death. You, criminal, black sheep of the race, pray to your deity for the last time, (*to Shakuni*) and you, deceitful traitor Gandhara! You—
- Shakuni : (*pretending to be terrified*) Not me, not me, Brikodara. I didn't drag Draupadi by her hair, I didn't attempt to disrobe that indisposed Sati in public, you had not sworn for my blood. You swore for this Dushasana's. Dushasana, what are you waiting for? In your name

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- Indra trembles, Basuki faints; give a befitting blow to his pride, crush the Pandava to the ground. (*exit*)
- Bhima : Dushasana, black sheep of the Kshatriya race, criminal, defend yourself if you can. (*advances*)
- Dushasana : I will also crush your vain pride today. (*exit while fighting; enter Shakuni from the opposite side.*)
- Shakuni : Where stands Bhima and where is Dushasana! O there they are—A terrible battle of maces is going on (*looking skywards*) Father, father wait for a while; I shall oblate you with the blood of my foes, (*exit; enter Dushasana and Bhima, fighting; at the blows with mace, Dushasana falls down on the ground. Bhima sits on his chest*)
- Bhima : You criminal, with this wretched hand, this hand (*delivering blows on the hands*) you caught sadhvi Panchali by the hair! If there is any one wishing to step in for your rescue, let him come forward and try. You call everyone who can give you succour. Call Duryodhana, yell for Karna, yell for Shakuni, let me see who can save you today. Bhima is not usual the Bhima today; he turns into a dreaded demon, (*drinks Dushashana's blood*) ha ha ha. Now my parched soul is satiated. I have killed Dushasana today. Panchali! Panchali! You can tie your hair today that was dishevelled for long. (*exit hurriedly*)

Act II

Scene VI

(*Inside a room in the Pandavas' camp. Like a mad man, Bhima enters, his face and hands smeared with blood*)

- Bhima : Krishnaa! Krishnaa! (*enter Draupadi*)
- Draupadi : What is this! Stains of blood everywhere! Are you wounded?
- Bhima : I'm not wounded, I have slaughtered one.
- Draupadi : What are you saying, there is blood everywhere but you said—

- Bhima : Don't worry, my beloved, I'm not driven mad. I have drunk human blood and also brought some for you.
- Draupadi : You drank human blood! But whose blood was it?
- Bhima : Of a younger brother, my dear younger brother.
- Draupadi : Of a brother! (*stepping backward, terrified*) Oh God, what am I hearing, what am I witnessing!
- Bhima : Yes, Yes Draupadi, implore your God aloud.
With the purity of your heart of hearts surrender to him. God is there, indeed.
(*approaching Draupadi*)
- Draupadi : What, you are going to kill me too? Kill me; kill me also. I'm the most unfortunate one; kill me too.
- Bhima : I will Krishnaa, I will kill you too. Let me kill that dishevelled-haired Panchali, kill that distressed Draupadi, killing that disgraced Yagyaseni, in her place (*catches hold of Krishnaa*) I shall make the Pandavas' Joylaxmi, the would be empress of Bharata, an ever-joyful one. Let me tie your dishevelled hair you waited to tie up at Dushasana's death; let me free you from the vow you kept. (*Bhima puts the bloodstains on her hair*)

Act II

Scene VII

(*Battlefield. Karna is kneeling, holding a chariot wheel; in front of Karna is Arjuna*)

- Karna : Partha, Partha
the glory of Kshatriyas;
my chariot has sunk in the ground,
wait for a while,
let me set my chariot right. (*Pulling the wheel*)
- Arjuna : Go ahead, the great warrior.
Release your wheel
I shall wait.
- Krishna : Dhananjaya, no mercy at all.
- Karna : Yadupati, Yadupati,
are you that merciful, the divine succour?

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Are you that God, salvation of the weak?
Partha, Partha,
you're the pride of the Kshatriyas;
misguided by the charioteer
defiling the image of the race,
don't deride the code of war.

Krishna : Following which code
did you support the move
when Panchali was disrobed in that Kaurava court?
In that unholy Kaurava court
when Pandavas were sent into exile
in a fixed game of dice,
following which code
did you concur with the evil design?
Following which code of conduct,
when Dushasana dragged Sati by her hair
in that court of assembly,
did you looking on, enjoying the sight,
tacitly supporting Dushasana's move?

Karna : Krishna, Krishna,
Duryodhana is the emperor,
I'm just a loyal subject.
Dharma of the monarch
is what the subject should follow.
But Yadupati,
thou art a free will.
Thou art not subject to the Pandavas.
Despite that why do thou incite the Pandava
conniving against the cousins
turn my golden land
into cremation grounds?

Krishna : No arguments,
Arjuna, Arjuna,
this is that devil who
mobbed, trapped
and shamelessly killed,
your dearest, budding Abhi
like a beast
flouting all codes of war.
This is the opportune moment
to settle your score, Falguna.

Arjuna : True, true, absolutely true.
 Evil sinner
 for protecting yourself
 you design to take the shield of the Kshatriya grace.
 You beast,
 you deserve a beastly death.
(about to release the arrow)

Karna : *(looking inside)* Sailya, Sailya,
 on the pretext of bringing the chariot out,
 why do you run away, fool? *(to Arjuna)*
 You, the blackguard of the Kshatriya race,
 very fortunate you're.
 Had I not fallen weak
 following curses at this fateful moment
 had not heartless destiny
 clamped down my chariot wheel,
 —even if the God were with you;
 with this Bijoy
 this Kshatriya priest
 would have beheaded you
 to oblate at Madhava's feet.

Arjuna : Before that, with your blood
 let me make the oblation first. *(releases the arrow;
 Karna falls)*

Karna : Sindhura, Sindhura,
 view from Partha's chariot
 how your laws are transgressed
 in this Kurukshetra war. *(Krishna alighting)*

Krishna : Not at all Karna,
 the glory of Kshatriya race,
 upholding the dharma, Kurukshetra turns into a holy
 land.

Karna : Adieu to you Karna, the great archer,
 you deserve Providence.
 : O blissful one,
 this is the end of my mysterious life.
 Please bless me at my dusk,
 that in the present and the lives to come
 I can surrender at thy lotus feet. *(dies)*

Act III

Scene I

(*Dhritarashtra's palace. Dhritarashtra and Duryodhana*)

Dhritarashtra : Karna is no more, Dushasana passed away, our army is crushed! And—

Duryodhana : Father, for that—

Dhritarashtra : Keep quiet, keep quiet. Leave me alone to plan the next move. We have lost all, but not Shakuni-(*pauses*) Duryodhana.

Duryodhana : Father—

Dhritarashtra : If anything untoward has befallen, can you withstand it? Can you recall the dead to life?

Duryodhana : I have not understood, Father—

Dhritarashtra : Me too. I too fail to understand how things have come to such a pass. I can't make out what you have uttered. Bhima killed Dushasana! You must be crazy, Duryodhana, you must be.

Duryodhana : Father, Father, you are getting perturbed. How can you be perturbed? Where have you seen me perturbed? Father, you need rest, let me show you the bed.

Dhritarashtra : You want to show me my deathbed? Ha ha hā, you can't present me with death, my son. I fathered one hundred sons. Have you not seen the heartless destiny that has snatched all but one out of one hundred budding children one by one from my lap, before my very eyes! I'm blind; I'm aged, weary, senile; still death evades me. What death can you inflict on me my son, when it is not ordained?

Duryodhana : Father, don't be sad. Yes, you are divested of all, everything, but your Duryodhana is still alive. Bless me father so that I remain committed to my goal. Bless me that the tears of thousands of widows, the pain of bereavement of my little brothers, of the near and dear ones, can't weaken my pledge, can't drift me from my perseverance. Please bless me. (*Enter Gandhari silently*).

Dhritarashtra : Duryodhana, you proceed, proceed to the battlefield. My blessings—be victorious. Before I go senile, before

I breathe my last, let me cherish the Pandavas death.

Gandhari : When will that day dawn, Maharaja?
 Dhritarashtra : Who is it? O, Gandhari! Yes Gandhari, I train your query to yourself; you tell me Rani, when will that day dawn? (*Gandhari is silent*) You have no reply? I understand—you think that that day would never dawn. Gandhari, being a mother, don't wish the bane of your son. Please utter for once—that that the day will dawn.

Gandhari : Maharaja, no mother wishes ill of her child. For them she is ever ready for supreme sacrifice, if need be. But, that day will never come.

Dhritarashtra : Gandhari, Gandhari.

Duryodhana : *Ai*, that day will never dawn?

Gandhari : Never, my son.

Dhritarashtra : It will! It will! It will!

Gandhari : Maharaja, don't excite your imperilled son. That day will never dawn.

Duryodhana : *Ai*, if that day doesn't dawn, let it not. Let the Pandavas be victorious; let them thrive and thrive, I don't mind. But I will not also retreat lamenting. With birth, death is ordained. Why should I cower down for the lust for life?

Gandhari : Don't peeve, my son.

Duryodhana : Peeve! Me? For the rest of the world I may be a peeved one, but to you *Ai*, I'm still the loving child.

Dhritarashtra : Gandhari, Gandhari!

Gandhari : Maharaja!

Dhritarashtra : This is not the time for infantile indulgence. This is not the time for a mother lavishing love on her child. Prepare him for war; send him to the field. I can't stand the fact that, that devil Brikodara, the killer of my son is alive still.

Duryodhana : *Ai*, let me take leave of you; let me proceed to the front.

Gandhari : Don't be excited my son.

Dhritarashtra : Gandhari, don't spoil his time, let him go.

Gandhari : Why are you hurrying this parting, Maharaja?

Dhritarashtra : Why? You ask me why? Such a simple question, yet being a Kshatriya mother, being the spouse of a Kshatriya, being born in the Kshatriya race, you

couldn't comprehend, Gandhari? It is my misfortune! Why? Ask Rani, if you see those silent torpid clouds in the sky, ask them, ask the heavy air of Hastina filled with moaning of widows; ask these rows of pillars and stone walls of this palace that are about to melt at our deep sighs. Ask them, why Dhritarashtra is so impatient today.

- Gandhari : For scoring revenge?
 Dhritarashtra : Yes, I'm revenge driven. Does it surprise you?
 Gandhari : No Maharaja, not at all.
 Dhritarashtra : Then?
 Gandhari : It is nothing.
 Dhritarashtra : Fine. Duryodhana, proceed with your mother's blessings.
 Duryodhana : *Ai*.
 Gandhari : My son
 Duryodhana : (*bowing*) Bless me *Ai*, that destroying foes I may prove myself as your worthy son.
 Gandhari : Proceed my son, my blessings, dharma conquers.

Act III Scene II

(*Near the battlefield; enter Krishna*)

- Krishna : The war is drawing to its close. Only Duryodhana is left. With his elimination my duty will be over. Sailya and Shakuni? They are not to be worried about very much. Unless Duryodhana is taken care of before my brother returns from pilgrimage, it will be difficult later. Duryodhana is an ardent devotee of my brother, (*pause*) No, at the same time, Shakuni has to be taken care of too. Else... (*enter Shakuni*)
 Shakuni : How fortunate I'm to appear right before the Almighty. Please, accept my oblation. (*bowing his head*)
 Krishna : Uncle, I was just thinking about you.
 Shakuni : Within the ambit of the Kurukshetra or outside?
 Krishna : In between.
 Shakuni : Then my days are numbered.

- Krishna
Shakuni
- : Why?
- : So long as you are counting stars and planets, we could evade your notice. Now since you started counting the satellites, and since I'm a comet, I will be made to fall down.
- Krishna
Shakuni
- : Uncle, aren't you too clever?
- : *(with folded hands)* I owe it all to you.
- Krishna
Shakuni
- : Uncle, I have a query; would you reply?
- : Nothing is unknown to the Omniscient.
- Krishna
- : Tell me, whose defeat do you desire in Kurukshetra war?
- Shakuni
- : In this decisive fight, there is nothing much left to decide. Whether the outcome rejoices me or not, Yadupati knows it better.
- Krishna
- : Living off the generosity of the Kauravas, being such a close confidant of Duryodhana, why did you take to treachery?
- Shakuni
- : Shall I have to spell out that too to the Omniscient?
- Krishna
- : You are heartless.
- Shakuni
- : And you?
- Krishna
- : I'm doing my duty.
- Shakuni
- : O the merciful one, what slip did you discover in my duty?
- Krishna
- : In preference to misguiding with sweet words in the guise being a counselor, it is much better to revolt openly and face your foe in single combat, uncle.
- Shakuni
- : Yadupati, I'm a human being blind with rage. I know that misleading and treachery are crimes beyond tolerance. But does my treachery surpass the fraudulent sleep of the full-incarnated God?
- Krishna
Shakuni
- : You have wrongly interpreted it.
- : Groomed in wrongs since birth, I'm now committed to it. At this fag end of my life there is no room for rectification.
- Krishna
- : You're responsible for the Kauravas' ruin. The treacherous Bibhisana reduced the Golden Lanka to ashes and for you, uncle, this golden land turned into a cremation ground today.
- Shakuni
Krishna
- : O Madhava, please accept my gratitude.
- : I fail to understand.

- Shakuni : It is very simple. By blaming this bonded Shakuni, this pauper living on Duryodhana's bounty, this traitor Shakuni, the Omnipotent himself finds an excuse to throw all the blames of Kurukshetra war on his head; that Shakuni can't be a commoner. His life is graced, his birth is also graced, and I owe that life to you, Yadupati. Therefore, I'm grateful to you. Please, accept my gratitude.
- Krishna : Uncle, our objective differs. Yours is revenge, destruction. But me—I, whenever right declines and evil prevails (O Bharata) I take birth, to save the righteous and destroy the wicked, for firmly upholding the law, I am born from age to age.

Act III Scene III

(In the battlefield; enter Sailya)

- Sailya : The goal set for this Bharata war that none could reach—Sailya shall accomplish that. I recall the word of Shakuni on the day of Drona's death, "Sailya, Duryodhana's prestige is on you." That novel moment has arrived now. Duryodhana, losing your troop strength day by day because of the wrong selection of worthy generals, you will realise soon what blunder you committed. Had you made this Madra king the general at the first instance, you would have not seen these days, you would not have heard the wailing of war widows and the lament of orphans in Hastinapur. *(enter Shakuni)*
- Shakuni : Fierce battle is being fought over there, and being the general of Kaurava forces, you're admiring nature here!
- Sailya : Uncle, Sailya is aware of his responsibilities.
- Shakuni : I'm glad to hear that.
- Sailya : Where are Bhima and Arjuna?
- Shakuni : At the front, they are levelling our army from one end.
- Sailya : Why are you here?
- Shakuni : Looking for you.

- Sailya : There is no need to wait for me. Proceed and fight; our victory is certain. I shall wait here to challenge Bhima and Arjuna.
- Shakuni : But missing the commander in the field, our troops—
- Sailya : Don't argue. I'm the general; follow my command, proceed to the war.
- Shakuni : If I refuse to follow your orders?
- Sailya : You will not be excused as the uncle of the emperor. There is no room for cowards in Kurukshetra. Go to the battlefield.
- Shakuni : Sailya, the Bharat war is about to draw to a close. Many great heroes fell. Millions of warriors died. Duryodhana, the mightiest emperor of Bharat, has lost his clan, lost his strength. Everything. But no one, I repeat, no one, ever dared to show Shakuni his angry eyes, to command even at his wildest moments. None is terrified of Shakuni for his relationship with the crown, or because of his position in the court as the counsellor; they are terrified of Shakuni as Shakuni. Listen Sailya, this very Kurukshetra war, which you're commanding as the fourth general, for which you have shown your audacity in commanding me, I'm the inaugurator of this devastating war and only I will draw its curtain.
- Sailya : What are you up to?
- Shakuni : What I'm up to? Ha ha ha, Sailya, you want to know what I'm up to? Have you not heard me lamenting sitting amongst hundred corpses? When I cast the dice made of my father's bone, you could not understand then? Ha ha ha! What I'm up to? (*looks inside*) Look, look Yudhisthira is storming. Sailya, Kaurava general, your bell is about to knell. Get ready. (*exit; enter Yudhisthira from the opposite side.*)
- Yudhisthira : Madrapati, what do you prefer—surrender or do you want to be brave?
- Sailya : (*drawing his sword*) Protect yourself first, (*exit fighting; enter Sahadeva*)
- Yudhisthira : I do.
- Sahadeva : He is not here too. Where did he flee? Even by searching the globe from pole to pole, I shall trace you out and kill you today. (*exits; enter Shakuni*)

- Shakuni : Sailya died. Sahadeva is running after me. Adieu to you, Duryodhana. Consigning to your dark prison cell you led my family of one hundred brothers along with my father to a gruesome death by starvation. I have to settle my score today with an eye for eye leading your ninety-nine little brothers to ghastly death, leaving the age-weary blind Dhritarashtra to burn himself alive having been bereaved of his young sons, I turn his life hell, worst than death. My duty is fulfilled today. (*Enter Sahadeva*)
- Sahadeva : What happened? Are you shocked?
- Shakuni : Come, come, after the worship I have been waiting for you Sahadeva, you have arrived at the right moment. Today with the last breath of the Kauravas' counsellor, the comet of human civilization, the terror of Bharat, let the curtain of this Great War drop. But I will not surrender. I'm a revengeful Kshatriya. I also know warfare (*about to fight*) Father, father, the life I hued soaking in the blood of our foes I shall oblate now at your altar. Dhritarashtra, Gandhari, Duryodhana, ha, ha, ha.
- Sahadeva : Counsellor of the Kauravas, I grant you the last opportunity, before I behead you crooked Shakuni, have your last glance at this verdant Bharat.
- Shakuni : Sahadeva, I have not left Bharat green any more. I reduced it to ashes of pyre. I have not left the Kauravas as Kaurava any more; their pride is levelled to the dust and I have not left Duryodhana an emperor any more; I left him a beggar on the street, broken-hearted to lament in the Bharat cremation grounds.
- Sahadeva : You traitor, this is your reward, (*about to attack*)
- Shakuni : Shakuni, who can punish one hundred princes with death, he has the courage to face his own death. It is not my death today; it is salvation, (*fights; Shakuni falls. Sahadeva pushes the sword into his chest*)
- Sahadeva : You blot of civilization, you beast Shakuni—
- Shakuni : What a pleasure, ah! Pleasure, pleasure—

The End

Translated from Assamese by Prashanta Kumar Bordoloi

Translating Bhakti: Versions of Kabir in Colonial/Early Nationalist Period

Akshaya Kumar

I

Right from the pre-Independence nationalist period to the post-national globalized era, Kabir's poetry in English translation has appeared with such an uncanny regularity that today the translated Kabir rivals with, if not outgrows, the so-called 'original'¹ in terms of its discourse value. The saint-poet seems to survive more in the alien tongue than perhaps in his 'original one' as with each new translation he bounces back as a poet resurrected all over again. Multiple translations of Kabir have not only taken the poet beyond the frontiers of his native domain to the global market, but have also ensured him an 'after-life'² that borders on immortality. What are the cultural imperatives that lend such a rich and resounding posterity to Kabir in his English incarnation? What is it that compels the translators, Indian as well as foreign, to re-write Kabir in or against the shifting cultural contexts? The paper restricts itself to the comparative study of multiple translations of Kabir in English that took place during the colonial/early nationalist period³ with special emphasis on exploring the cultural politics and poetics that each translation is inevitably implicated in.

Before Kabir was translated into English, he was translated into Italian outside the official Oriental project⁴ by missionaries who found his popularity particularly in the northern parts of India too conspicuous to be left unaddressed. What prompted them all the more was their assessment that his teachings were closer to Christianity in terms of their reformatory rhetoric. Thus, though the *desi* Kabir was not the chosen official subject of the *margi* Orientalists, yet his translation into

European languages begins as early as the latter half of eighteenth century — a period hardly explored in the making of modern Hinduism⁵ — when an Italian Capuchin friar Marco Delia Tomba⁶ undertook the translation of two important texts — the *Mulapanji* and the *Jnansagar*— attributed to Kabirpanthis. David Lorenzen observes, though Marco's translations are "accurate", yet he seems to lend a "decidedly Christian twist to the translation."⁷ For instance, as Lorenzen cites, *mukti* a highly culture-specific term has been translated as *gloria permanente*—an expression, patently Christian.

II

The early English translations of Kabir, in a way, begin by default. He is translated more as one of the poets of Sikh holy text *Adi Granth*, rather than as an independent poet in his own right. Ernst Trumpp (1828-1885) translates some of the songs of Kabir as part of his translation of *Adi Granth* in 1877. Trumpp — a German professor of Oriental Languages at the University of Munich— undertakes the translation in a "literal grammatical way"⁸ using expression which is admittedly "unidiomatic" in the hope that such an endeavour would yield a "translation which should be of any scientific value (vii)". The very purpose of being scientific in translation itself in a way forbids the translator from being creative and inventive enough within the thematic and structural grids of the original text. No wonder, the holy text is translated with the least empathy of a believer.

Kabir is translated quite literally and mechanically, to the extent that 'the original syntax' with all its punctuations, co-ordinates and sequence is retained rather fastidiously. The translator does not evince confidence to dovetail propositions that are conditional, contradictory or complementary; instead, he separates them halfway by the strong caesura. For instance he would write, "Kabir is the barking dog, he runs after a carcass" (683, 209) instead of "Kabir is a barking dog that runs after carcass". Similarly in this utterance, "sow such a seed, that is bearing fruit during the whole year!" (684, 229), a single complex sentence would have been laconic: "sow a seed that bears fruit throughout." Sometimes this incapability of the translator to club clauses causes confusion: "Kabir (says): At which gate the comers and goers nobody stops:/ How should that gate, which is such a gate, be given up?"

The frequent use of the conjunction 'and' in contexts that are so concomitant unnecessarily prolongs the final message. The use of

'and', for instance, in this expression — "Like as ripe fruits of a tree fall to the ground and do not stick back to the branch" (672, 30) — could have been totally dispensed away with, in favour of a much more continuous and cohesive structure like this: "Like as ripe fruits fallen, never return to their branch." Trumpp employs parenthesis quite often to complete the syntax, otherwise left incomplete in original Kabir's structures. "By coming in contact with it (people) have become most excellent, (like), the scentless iron (and) wood (is made fragrant by contact with sandalwood)" (675, 77). There is an anxiety to use full grammatical structures, providing even utterly dispensable connectives which are otherwise so well-anticipated or understood.

Rather rarely does Trumpp replace the literal with the idiomatic. He would retain "idols of clay" (674, 64), instead of the idiomatic "puppets of clay" (288, 64); "bones wrapt in a skin" (672, 37) instead of the colloquial "bones in a bag of skin"; "juice of the name" instead of the more *bhakti*-specific usage "the nectar of His name"; a literal expression like "I remain in the wave of the lotus-foot at the end and at the beginning" (677, 120) could have been translated idiomatically thus: "I bask for ever in the joy of God's lotus feet."

Instead of the active, Trumpp prefers to use the passive voice, toning down in the process the immediacy and the activist tenor of the saint-poetry. Instead of "saints eat the butter," the translated expression is "By the saints the butter is eaten" (672, 19); instead of "bones burn like wood, and hair like grass," we have "bones are burnt like wood, the hair is burnt like grass" (762, 36); instead of "keep in mind," the chosen expression is "this is to be kept in mind" (673, 44); "fisherman casts his net" is made passive thus: "a net is laid out by the fisherman" (673, 49).

The purpose of Trumpp's translation was not to set an example of creative translation but to make *Adi Granth* known⁹ — to make a text known was indeed one of the major concerns of nineteenth century translators¹⁰. The enterprise is purely intellectual as the translator does not evince the requisite empathy with the sayings of the holy text. Ostensibly he would ridicule Sikh Gurus and their sayings to denigrate Hinduism as a whole of which, he believed, Sikhism was an offshoot. Max Muller described Trumpp "by no means a trustworthy translator"¹¹. Though Kabir was not a part of the official oriental project, yet, a significant aspect of Trumpp's project was that it was supported by "Her Majesty's Government for India which in due consideration of the importance of the work planned its execution and defrayed its expenses" (viii).

III

Max Arthur Macauliffe did another translation of *Adi Granth* in 1909 in which Kabir's verses were translated in a different vein altogether. There is an intentional 'political' shift as unlike Trumpp, he does not intend to portray Sikhism as a dwindling religion; rather his effort is to bring out the 'distinct' wisdom of Sikh Gurus and *bhakti* saints. He refers to the "novel plan" of his translation according to which unlike most of the translations undertaken and accomplished under the Orientalist project, the present work is thrown open to native criticism and its possible approval. He goes on to enlist the support he received on the authenticity of his translation from Sikh clergy.

Macauliffe's plan suggests a subtle shift in colonial ways of negotiating/appropriating the East. Whereas Trumpp would not miss an opportunity to run down or ridicule Sikh Gurus and *bhakti* saints, Macauliffe would rather appropriate Sikhism and native wisdom in terms which are overtly appreciative.

Trumpp's effort was to underline that Sikhism (including Kabir) was a part of Hinduism; whereas Macauliffe championed the cause of Sikhism as separate from Hinduism and hence sought the support or native Sikh clergy. Though both the translators were sponsored by British colonial administrators, yet the shift in their stance marks the shift in the stance of colonial cultural policy. When Trumpp was commissioned to translate *Adi Granth* and to look at Sikh scriptures, he was given the specific task of proving that Sikh theology and cosmology were different from those of the Vedas and the Upanishads. But he found nothing in them to support this view. He found Nanak a "thorough Hindu," his religion "a pantheism, derived directly from Hindu sources." Unsatisfied with Trumpp's assimilative pro-Hindu findings, Macauliffe, a minister of culture himself, undertook the charge of re-translating *Adi Granth* in terms of its distinctness from canonical Hindu texts. His effort was to create a cultural wedge between Hinduism and Sikhism.

Whereas in Trumpp's translation, there is no one 'God'¹², in Macauliffe's translation, more often than not 'God' (or 'Lord') is the general term used for Hari, Vishnu, Rama and even Om. "Maya" is translated variously as "worldly love" ((279, sloka 8), "the body" (281, 18), "illusion" etc. This is an obvious strategy of appropriation and assimilation. The Hindu signifiers are translated in secular terms so that the Hindu bearings of Sikhism could be played down or camouflaged. The attempt is to remove the cultural specific barriers and if it is not

easily achievable through easy one-to-one transference of secular lexicon, the translator would go for extended periphrasis. "The whole world is dead" would be extended to "The whole world is dead in spiritual ignorance" (288, 69). At times such an extension becomes rather explicatory and banal "I have seen and examined everything, and I find no one hath a friend" (295, 113). Similarly, instead of saying "*khichri* is good food, in which there is nectar like-salt (681, 188)", he would use an extended expression "an excellent dinner is *khichari* seasoned with sufficient salt to make it palatable" (307, 188). Instead of leaving the expression open-ended as "the name of God as water," he would add "to *extinguish it* (fire)" (143, Gauri, I). What is at times supplemented through the use of parenthesis in Trumpp's translation, is supplemented through the use of italicized expression in Macauliffe's.

Macauliffe tends to be explicit in his translation thereby preempting or minimizing the needs of exegetical support from Hindu sources, and making his translation self-evident and autotelic. The authorial extensions are made in italics, pointing towards the translator's conscious attempt of being explicit and interpretative at the same time. Not only this tendency to extend the phrase forecloses the semantic possibilities, it tends to generate "unwieldy periphrasis" (xxxi) of the pithy sayings. The enigma of the expression "One day thou shall sleep stretched out at full length" is undone by the periphrastic addition of "*in the grave*" (298, 127). The uncanny succinctness of *bhakti*-poetry has always been a challenge often unsuccessfully met by the English translator—foreign as much as native. To overcome the problem, he takes recourse to either long parenthesis or extensions through italics.

A very significant aspect of Macauliffe's explanatory additions is that they are selectively done as the translation targets the Sikh constituency mainly. Wherever longer explanations are required, Macauliffe would leave them unexplained or half-explained. For instance in hymn XVII (266), Kabir refers 'to twenty five categories' as worldly entrenchments, the translator would provide the canonical source namely Sankhya philosophy in the footnotes and then would hastily add, "An enumeration of the categories here would not assist the Sikh student" (226).

Though Macauliffe's translation in its effort to combine the literal with the suggested, tends to be explanatory and prosaic, yet at places it reveals his idiomatic and poetical prowess in definite measure: instead of the ordinary expression "the blow of spear is easy," he would rather employ more alliterative expression like this, "slight is the stroke of a lance" (306, 183). Though Macauliffe avoids archaisms yet he would often use the outdated subjunctive mood (xxx) to retain the peculiar

character of *bhakti* poetry. In *bhakti* poetry subjunctive mood is often used to engender some kind of literary deviance through the clever play of incompatible tenses in a single utterance.

Trumpp's English is least poetical or literary; by way of comparison Macauliffe has a greater control over diction. Trumpp's effort is at best a project of translation with no empathy for the text being translated; Macauliffe's translation is not as empirical as the anxiety of native approval always bothers him.

IV

Meanwhile, Westcott's book *Kabir and the Kabirpanth*¹² had come out in 1907. From the point of view of translation, the book may not be very important as the writer quotes the saint-poet mostly through translations already available (Trumpp's translation of Kabir in *Adi Granth*, primarily), and occasionally through his own translations, yet being the first independent book in English on Kabir, it generated quite an interest in him, and could be taken as the first important venture towards the internationalization of the saint-poet. The Orientalist hangover is clearly visible in Westcott's enterprise, for Kabir is seen as the Indian counterpart of the European Martin Luther. In fact the book begins with a table that chronicles the rise of saint-reformers both in Hinduism and Christianity in close correspondence¹³. The syncretic character of Kabirpanth is acknowledged, but the underlying impulse is Christian. The very rhetoric of the question asked in the Preface points towards the Christian bias of the writer: "If Christ had been an Indian, would not his Gospel have been welcomed by many who now, refuse to listen?" (not paginated).

Westcott's translations are prosaic and at best can be described as of a working nature only. More than the poetry, the emphasis is on its subject matter in terms of the secular approach of the saint-poet to issues pertaining to morality and metaphysics. Also very significantly, he divides different sayings of Kabir along thematic lines such as "The World and Religion", "Religion in Life", "The Way to God" etc.—a practice which was later on followed by Vaudeville in her translations of the saint-poet. There is no attempt at versification, for the translated sayings are used for mere 'illustration'. Unlike Trumpp and Macauliffe who stick to Kabir compiled in *Adi Granth*, Westcott goes beyond the printed Kabir, and collects 'oral' sayings from the field. He is actually "guided by the judgement of Kabir

Panthis" (45) as much as of his own in the selection of *sakhis* included in the book.

In terms of its special attributes as a text of translation, Westcott's endeavour has two distinct features—first, the cultural-specific terms are left untranslated; second, he gives an extended glossary of such terms towards the end of his book. The *desi* expressions are given extended treatment and their semantic nuances are explained in terms of their philosophical import. Kabir was past-master in employing words which have more than one meaning. While translating Kabir, Westcott does refer to the intended ambivalence of his couplets. Another peculiar feature of Westcott's book is that at times he would lift an equivalent Christian source or even a Sufi source, and would place it just after Kabir's *sakhi* to buttress his thesis that Kabir was as much an original thinker as a translator of 'old thoughts'.

V

Tagore's translation¹⁴ of Kabir's poems is the 'first major translation' of the saint-poet exclusively — a work which he accomplishes just three years after his world-famous book of verses named *Gitanjali* — appears in England in 1912. It is major because it is the first exclusive endeavour of translating Kabir, more as a poet, than as a mere religious reformer. It is also major in terms of its reception. Coming close on heels of Tagore's Nobel Prize fame it received an immediate international limelight. It has been reprinted many times over and by different publishers, both in India and abroad. No subsequent translation of Kabir has received so much attention. The purpose of Tagore's translations in general was to internationalize Kabir as well his own writings. Sukanta Chaudhuri, a well-known Tagore-scholar observes: "Their surface [Tagore's translations] intent is to disseminate and institutionalize the poet's work abroad".¹⁵

Enamoured as he was by Indian mysticism, Tagore asked his friend Kshitimohan Sen to compile Kabir's songs as they are actually sung by itinerant sadhus all over Northern India (especially in Bengal). Out of the four volumes compiled, Tagore eventually selects one hundred songs of Kabir for translation purposes. Unlike many later translations, Tagore uses the plain term 'poem' for any of Kabir's verse, be it a *shabad*, a *ramaini* or a *sakhi*. Since the latter translators used written or printed texts as their source text(s), they naturally tend to be more fastidious about maintaining a distinction of form; for Tagore,

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it is the unlettered 'oral' that constitutes the original. All subsequent translations rely singularly on the printed and the written. Tagore's fascination for the 'oral' over and above the written or the printed is very much evident as he quarrels with the publisher of a book of songs in Bangla thus: "What we wanted was simple songs of genuine untutored hearts."¹⁶ Of course these remarks are made with reference to his love for Baul songs, but they hold true for his fascination for the 'oral Kabir' too.

No wonder, later researchers and translators question the very authenticity of the so-called Kabir's song translated by Tagore. Rev. Ahmad Shah who had just compiled Kabir's *Bijak* in 1911, and was in the process of completing its English translation when Tagore's translation came out, in his observations questioned the authorship of the songs translated by Tagore, right then. According to Shah, out of the hundred poems translated by Tagore, there are "only five which in a mutilated form can be safely attributed to Kabir."¹⁷ Winand M. Callewaert, a well-known Kabir scholar writes thus: "Having now prepared a critical edition of the songs of Kabir, based on the earliest available manuscript material, it is my guess that hardly any of the Tagore songs was composed by Kabir"¹⁸. Further he writes: "I can understand that a translator of Kabir may look for a nice song without bothering about its authenticity. But let us not start writing commentaries on Kabir and fifteenth century Banaras quoting those songs."¹⁹ Vaudeville, another Kabir scholar and translator, has this to say on the authenticity of Kabir's songs in Tagore's collection: "It was Tagore who suggested to his friend Kshitimohan Sen the collection of the poems attributed to Kabir and sung by itinerant sadhus all over Northern India (especially in Bengal) and their translation into Bengali. The authenticity of these poems is very questionable; it appears that most of them were probably not composed by Kabir."²⁰ As a translator, even of his own works, Tagore seems to have less regard for the original. In at least 26 cases of his translations of his own works, as Sukanta Chaudhuri informs us, "no original has been found, though a line or phrase here and there might recall some Bengali poem."²¹

In his selection of Kabir songs, Tagore reveals a conspicuous urge to choose those songs which are more mystical in content and message; the social side of Kabir is underplayed. What one encounters in the translations is an esoteric world where "flame burns without lamp"; "The lotus blossoms without a root" (LIII, 58); "a strange tree, which stands without roots and bears fruits without blossoming" (XLVII, 53). Tagore's Kabir is more or less a *vedantin*, his *lok-dharmi* aspect is

underplayed if not knocked out altogether. Here Linda Hess's observation is very pertinent: "This Kabir is less caustic and more constantly ecstatic than the sharp-eyed observer of society who appears in older collections."²² Tagore's propensity for the mystical Kabir is understandable, both in terms of his own strong personal inclinations for the metaphysical, and in terms of the cultural imperatives of age in which he was writing.

The Infinite is so ubiquitously present in Tagore's translations that one wonders if Kabir at all had any grasp of the tangible and the concrete:

The infinite dwelling of the Infinite being is every
where; in earth, water, sky, and air:
Firm as the thunderbolt, the seat of the seeker is
established, above the void.
He who is within is without I see Him and none
else. (LVI, 62)

The finite as the locus of *bhakti* stands thoroughly compromised, if not erased altogether. Consequently Tagore's Kabir, in translation, appears more as a refined and sophisticated Shankara, than a *desi* poet of the domain of the people. These are translations in what could be termed as a "pseudo-oriental"²³ mould.

Tagore's own foregrounding in the art of versification, his control over English diction and cadences present before us an image of Kabir as one who is a poet of impeccable classical make-up. The directness of speech, its rough and blunt edges — the qualities that stand out as typically Kabiresque hardly emerge in the translation. An avid reader of Romantic and Edwardian English poetry, Tagore adds a rare literary touch to the otherwise earthy utterances of Kabir, almost compromising in the process the tone and tenor of his protest poetry. Vinay Dharwadkar would term it as "opacity"²⁴ in style.

The remarkable aspect of Tagore's translation however is that it redeems Kabir from the alien biblical mould; it approaches him more as a poet of the classical style and stature than just a social reformer. Again by way of comparison, the translations of both Trumpp and Macauliffe were more in the nature of scholarly exercises; Tagore's endeavour is more poetic because it is a poet translating another poet. Also, unlike Trumpp and Macauliffe, Tagore is not attempting an encyclopaedia; he is only presenting those chosen verses of the saint-poet which he loves most. Another distinct advantage that rests with Tagore's effort is that it comes from a *sahridaya* insider, and not from

the so-called 'objective' outsider. Tagore's Kabir is not a Martin Luther, but a wandering *baul*.

While reading Tagore's translation it becomes difficult to make out as to where Kabir ends and Tagore the poet takes over. One can read a verse of *Gitanjali* and a translated song of Kabir simultaneously as natural extensions of each other, without any sense of rupture or deviance of mood. Look at the first poem in *Gitanjali*²⁵; in imagery, message and paradoxical strain, it is no different from a *sakhi* of Kabir:

Thou hast made me endless, such is thy pleasure.
This frail vessel thou emptiest again and again, and
 filllest it ever with fresh life.
This little flute of a reed thou hast carried over hills
and dales, and hast breathed through it melodies
 eternally new . . .

The imagery of vessel being filled and emptied is conspicuously Kabiresque. Similarly the songs of Kabir, particularly the ones translated by Tagore, can easily be read as poetic utterances of the poet Tagore himself. For instance poem no. XXX is so Tagore-like:

On this tree is a bird: it dances in the joy of life.
None knows where it is: and who knows what the
burden of its music may be?

It is this poetic echo which the translations of Trumpp and Macauliffe fail to invoke. Kabir truly becomes the subject of poetic inspiration in the case of Tagore, and not an object of scholarly debates.

Inspired translations run the risk of deviating from the so-called sacrosanct original. Tagore's own poetic propensities, it can be argued, tamper with the original text, but they nevertheless enrich and enhance the open-ended dynamism of Kabir. Kabir would continue to be translated for the simple reason that his verses provide enough room to the creative translator for improvisation. The open-endedness and the eternal flexibility of Kabir's verses pose a major challenge to scholars-translators who want to contain the saint-poet in scholastic or reformatory frames; for the poet-translators they however constitute the right stuff for ontological transformations. Tagore's Kabir, as pointed out earlier, may be inauthentic, but he is at his poetic best.

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VI

Two years after Tagore's much-celebrated translation, another translation of Kabir²⁶ by Rev. Ahmad Shah of Hamirpur (UP) appeared in 1917. The translation remained more or less obscure, except that subsequent translators, while making a claim for their respective translations, referred to its 'poor'²⁷ quality of translation. The complex subjectivity of the translator of being an Indian Muslim converted to Christianity, however, adds an intriguing dimension to his very enterprise of translation. It is intriguing because Kabir for his anti-sanskritic stance and raw nativity, was never on the official agenda of pro-brahminical Orientalists—both native and colonialist. It is well-known that the official Orientalists were only concerned with the canonical and the classical. Rev. Ahmad Shah's translation, however, is not only financially supported by the then colonial government in UP, he is amply assisted by two English Christian missionaries — Rev. E. W. Ormerod and Rev. Canon B.H.P. Fisher — of the Cawnpore Brotherhood as well. Should it be seen as an attempt at appropriation of Kabir into Christianity in the wake of his marginalization in *margi* Hinduism? Also should it be seen as the beginning of Orientalization of the native and the folk, alongside that of the classical?

Interestingly enough, Ahmad Shah shows immense awareness of the body-snatching-game that was being played around the persona and poetry of Kabir. He would dismiss all attempts of his predecessors and contemporaries in projecting 'Kabir as the Martin Luther' of Hinduism, or Kabir as a 'protestant' *bhakti* saint. In fact he does not approve of appropriation of Kabir into any canonical religion. His introductory remarks are very informative indeed:

In modern India, organized attempts, such as that of the Brahma Samaj, to correct the abuses in Hinduism tend to be branded as disguised Christianity. It may be noted that an interesting, if unconvincing, attempt to connect the Kabir Panth with the teaching of the Jesuits has been made by Pt. Walji Bhai of the Irish Presbyterian Church. It seems probable that a similar tendency caused Kabir in his own day to be called a Moslem; while the Moslems on the whole welcome his efforts, as a help in combating the idol worship of India, and acknowledged him as a Pir for his self-denying and pious life.²⁸ (40)

His approach towards Kabir is refreshingly new and unprecedented.

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He would treat Kabir as an 'original' preacher-poet — a stance which till date any of the scholars of Kabir have failed to accept and acknowledge. From the present-day Dalit critic Dharmveer to Christian missionaries of the colonial period, Kabir has been placed in one religious discourse or the other, denying him autonomy of voice. Even in the introduction to Tagore's translation, what is highlighted is not Kabir's individuality, but his capacity to 'fuse'²⁹ various strands of mysticism that run across various religions. Ahmad Shah, on the other hand, would underline the "enormous influence (that) he [Kabir] exercised upon subsequent religious thinking" (37) and not the other way round. The agency is granted to Kabir, instead to the various religions that supposedly shaped him.

Having advocated or asserted the 'originality' or 'agency' of Kabir, does Shah translate Kabir differently? In other words, do Kabir's verses in English translation look different from, say, the messages of the Bible or any other religious text? Despite the fact that Shah presumably translates Kabir not under any appropriating agenda, yet his translation has biblical tones in terms of its syntax, diction, tone and tenor. F.E. Keay, in his *Kabir and His Followers*, quotes many passages from Kabir which bear similarity with biblical messages. And interestingly he deploys some of the verses translated by Ahmad Shah and also by Westcott for this purpose. While he does so, he makes a very pertinent comment on the limitations of translation, especially when the translator himself is foregrounded in the Bible, thus: "With regard to such passages as these, it may be remarked that in translating them into English, a translator who is acquainted with the Bible tends to assimilate his language to the words of the Bible, and this often makes the connection seem closer than it really is."³⁰ Unlike Tagore, Ahmad Shah is neither a poet in his own right, nor does he reveal any understanding of contemporary English poetry anywhere. The Bible happens to be his only model.

As against Tagore's reliance on the 'oral' songs of Kabir, Shah's sources are written and printed. Also, in comparison to Tagore's very sophisticated and poetic translations, Ahmad Shah's translation never intended to be literary, for its purposes were more or less religious. It tends to be prosaic and message-oriented. There is no attempt at precision as structures are retained literally without even experimenting with the given punctuation: — "Renounce self and recite the name of Hari: efface defects from head to toe./ Have no fear of any creature: this is the essence of *sadhu's* faith" (197, 138).

Unlike any other translation of Kabir, besides the customary

Preface, Shah's translation contains full five chapters dealing with the life of Kabir in legend, the design and layout of the original *Bijak*, the teaching of *Bijak*, the cosmology of *Bijak* and the principles of the Kabirpanth. These five chapters run into as many as 45 pages. The extraordinary space given to prose essays in the book amply proves the fact that Shah's endeavour was not just contained to the translation of the saint-poet, it was to introduce Kabir and Kabirpanth to the Western audience in a comprehensive way. Shah's book is therefore as much a translation of *Bijak*, as it is a critical account of Kabir and Kabirpanth.

Very much like Westcott, Ahmad Shah sticks to culture-specific vocabulary; for example, native words like *ghat*, *mahavat*, *amrit*, *sadhu*, *pandit*, *ghi* etc. are retained in italics. There is no extensive footnoting also. There is no such anxiety to forge an assimilationist idiom—an idiom which Macauliffe aimed at. Even Tagore fails to show as much confidence in retaining the native words in his translation of Kabir. The unique feature of Shah's translation is that towards the end it contains a rather unusual glossary of proper names mentioned in *Bijak*. Of course most of the entries in the glossary have been lifted from Dowson's *Classical Dictionary of Hindu Mythology*, yet what stands out is Shah's concern for the specific detail.

VII

Translating *bhakti* thus remains an endeavour that never receives the official support of the Orientalists. It nevertheless flourishes on the margins of the project of Oriental Studies with no different motives. It rather extends and enlarges its scope and reach by way of appropriating the counter-canonical and native discourse of *bhakti* in terms which are either patently Christian or brahminical. Not only that the discourse of *bhakti* is denied its autonomous character; it is also translated as a *desi* derivative of the lofty classical religions. Kabir is reduced to a countryside version of either a Martin Luther or a Sankara, and if at all he is granted originality, it is translated in terms which are overtly so classical and scriptural that the people-centric discourse of *bhakti* remains under-expressed.

Notes / References

1. The binary of the 'original' versus the 'translated' becomes quite contentious and even untenable in the case of Kabir because the so-called original Kabir is itself elusive. Rev. G.H. Westcott puts the entire debate in perspective thus: "We may safely credit Kabir with a considerable amount of originality and, even where originality seems unlikely, feel grateful to him for the genius with which he has given expression to old thoughts" (*Kabir and the Kabirpanth*, Munshiram Manoharlal Publishers Pvt. Ltd., New Delhi, 2nd revised ed. 1986, 45). In other words, the 'original' Kabir is always already partly translated and therefore in this sense his subsequent translations could be seen not as versions of Kabir—they are rather extensions of Kabir in another tongue. Vinay Dharwadkar, employing post-modern terminology, would approach Kabir's corpus as "collective experiments in the aesthetics of palimpsestic textuality" ("Introduction" to *Kabir: The Weaver's Songs*, Penguin Books, 2003, 65), thus enlarging Kabir beyond the source-target dualism.
2. Walter Benjamin dwells on how through multiple translations of a work it transcends its organic corporeality: "... a translation issues from the original — not so much from its life as from its after-life. For a translation comes later than the original, and since important works of world literature never find their chosen translators at the time of their origin, their translation marks the stage of continued life. . . . In them [translations] the life of the originals attains its latest, continually renewed, and most complete unfolding." - "The Task of the Translator", *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings*, Vol. I, 1913-1926, Eds. Marcus Bullock and Michael Jennings, The Belknap Press of Harvard Univ.: Cambridge, Massachusetts, London, 1996, 254-5.
3. In the early phase of Third World nationalism, First World nationalism was perceived to be the modular form of nationalism, till it was challenged or at least theoretically questioned by the Gandhian ideal of *swaraj*. In the paper, it would be maintained that nationalism remains very much the flip side of colonialism.
4. In fact William Jones was very much aware of the verses of Kabir, but due to their heretical tenor, he chose to ignore them. Peter Gaefke informs, "When it was shown to William Jones, he read it but suppressed it because of the many heretical statements in it. In the times of Jones, it was not advisable to discuss Kabir in Muslim circles." — "Kabir in Literature by and for Muslims", *Images of Kabir*, ed. Monika Horstmann. Delhi: Manohar, 2002, 158.
5. David Lorenzen's observations in this context are pertinent: "The lives and writings of the European missionaries who worked in India in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries have still not been adequately studied. The best known of these missionaries is the Italian Jesuit Roberto de Nobili (1577-1656) who lived for many years in South India. Some of his

works have been published and the modern Jesuit scholar S. Rajamanickam has written about him. The writings of four other early missionary intellectuals have also been at least partially published: the Portuguese Jesuit, Goncalo Fernandes Trancoso (1541-1621), the British Jesuit Thomas Stephens (1549-1619), the Lutheran Bartholomaeus Ziegenbalg (1683-1719), and the Italian Franciscan monk, Marco Delia Tomba (1726-1803). One important unpublished text is a long dialogue between a Christian and a Hindu written in Hindi and Italian by another Italian Franciscan, Giuseppe Maria da Gargnano, who was in North India from 1749 to 1761." - "Who Invented Hinduism?" *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, No.41, Vol.4, 1999, 638-39.

6. "The Italian Capuchin friar Marco Delia Tomba, born in 1726 as Pietro Girolamo Agresti, arrived in Pondicherry in 1757. From there he travelled to Chandernagore and in 1758 set out for Patna and the small state of Bettiah on the border of Nepal. Apart from two years spent in Chatrapur and several short stays in Patna, he was mostly in Bettiah until his return to Italy in 1773. He returned to north India, and died at Bhagalpur on March 1803." David Lorenzen, "Marco Delia Tomba and the Kabir-Panth," *Images of Kabir*, 33.
7. *Ibid.*, 39.
8. E. Trumpp explains his methodology thus, "As I went on, I noted down all grammatical forms and obsolete words I met with, and thus I gradually drew up a grammar and a dictionary so that I could refer to every passage again, whenever I found it necessary for the sake of comparison" - "Preface" to *The Adi Granth or The Holy Scriptures of the Sikhs*, Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal Publishers Pvt. Ltd., 1978, 3rd ed., vii. The quotes from the book have not been given separate notes, the page number along with the couplet number quoted from Kabir are given in parenthesis at the end of each quote.
9. Trumpp explains: . . . though I can hardly expect that the Granth will not attract many readers, the less so, as Sikhism is a waning religion . . . The Sikh Granth, which will always keep its place in the history of religion, lies now open before us, and we know authentically what their Gurus taught" - "Preface" to *The Adi Granth*, vii-viii.
10. Susan Bassnett, *Translation Studies*, London & New York: Routledge, 1991, 69.
11. Max Muller quoted in Macauliffe, *The Sikh Religion: Its Gurus, Sacred Writings and Authors*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1909, Vol. 1, xv. No separate notes are given for the quotes taken from Macauliffe's translation. The page number and the verse number however are mentioned in the parenthesis.
12. Rev. G.H. Westcott, *Kabir and the Kabirpanth*, Munshiram Manoharlal Publishers Pvt. Ltd., New Delhi, 2nd revised ed. 1986. All the subsequent quotes from the book have been taken from this edition; the respective page number has been given in parenthesis. The book was originally published by Christ Church Mission Press, Cawnpore, 1907.

13. Westcott makes an interesting chronological table in which he places Hindu and Christian saints in corresponding time frames. Ramanand (1300-1400) is seen to be a contemporary of Wycliffe (1324-84), Gorak Nath (1420-85) is placed against Erasmus (1467-1536), Kabir (1440-1518) is shown to be the contemporary of Luther (1483-1546), Nanak (1469-1538) is placed against Cranmer (1489-1555) etc. not paginated.
14. Charlotte Vaudeville also translates Kabir under various thematic heads.
15. Tagore, *One Hundred Poems of Kabir*, London: Macmillan, 1961, 1st ed. 1915.
16. Sukanta Chaudhuri, *Translation and Understanding*, Delhi: OUP, 1999, 46.
17. Tagore, while reviewing a book entitled *Sangit Sangraha: Bauler Gatha*, takes exception to the inclusion of "Brahmo songs and songs of modern English-wallahs into the book" — "Baul Songs: A Review of the Book *Sangit Sangraha: Bauler Gatha*", in *Rabindranath Tagore: Selected Writings on Literature and Language*, eds. Sisir Kumar Das & Sukanta Chaudhuri, Delhi: OUP, 47.
18. Ahmad Shah quoted by F.E. Keay, *Kabir and His Followers*, Delhi: Mittal Publications, 1995 rpt, 1st ed. 1931, 62.
19. Winand M. Callewaert, "Preface" to *The Millennium Kabir Vani*, Delhi: Manohar, 2000, vii.
20. *Ibid.*
21. Charlotte Vaudeville, *Kabir*, Vol 1., Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1974, 18.
22. Sukanta Chaudhuri, *Translation and Understanding*, 45.
23. Linda Hess quoted in "Introduction" to *The Millennium Kabir Vani*, Winand M. Callewaert, 14.
24. Sukanta Chaudhuri, *Translation and Understanding*, 44.
25. Vinay Dharwadker, "Translator's Note", *Kabir: The Weaver's Songs*, xi.
26. Tagore, *Gitanjali*, London: MacMillan, 1952. The quotes from the book have not been given separate notes.
27. Ahmad Shah, trans., *The Bijak of Kabir*, Delhi: Asian Publication Services, 1977. Shah finished the translation of *Bijak* in February, 1916, which was subsequently revised and corrected by Rev. E.W. Ormerod. It was finally published in May, 1917. The quotes from the book have not been given separate notes.
28. This is how one later translator refers to Shah's translation: "Ahmad Shah's English translation of the *Bijak* was hailed by Grierson with enthusiasm, not so much for its literary achievement — which was rather poor — as for Kabir's extraordinary personality." Charlotte Vaudeville, *A Weaver Named Kabir*, OUP, 1993, 2nd Impression, 2001, 135. Winand M. Callewaert, while acknowledging the non-selective nature of Shah's translation observes, "Rev Ahmad Shah's, *The Bijak of Kabir*, Hamirpur, India, 1917, while a very poor translation, remains the only complete English version of the *Bijak*." "Introduction" to *The Millennium Kabir Vani*, 4. Linda Hess and Shukdeo Singh have this to say on the quality of Shah's translation: "Ahmad Shah's 1917 translation of the *Bijak* is stiff and far from the original style of Kabir, and lacks notes on dubious points of translation." — "Preface" to *The Bijak of Kabir*, Delhi: OUP, 2002, xii.

29. Ahmad Shah, "The Teaching of the *Bijak*", *The Bijak of Kabir*, 40.
30. Evelyn Underhill introduces Tagore's *One Hundred Poems of Kabir* in terms of their capacity to fuse various cultures thus: "We may safely assert, however, that in their teaching two — perhaps three — apparently antagonistic streams of intense spiritual culture met, . . . and it is one of the outstanding characteristics of Kabir's genius that he was able in his poems to fuse them into one. — vii-viii.
31. F.E.Keay *Kabir and His Followers*, 169-170.



The Origin of Oriya Jatra

Hemant Kumar Das

Some critics have declared that Oriya Jatra, a very prominent genre of folk theatre, has originated under the direct influence of the Bengali Jatra. Though this powerful medium of folk entertainment is prevalent in Assam, Bengal, Bihar and Orissa, yet Bengal is its real birthplace. Writes Balwant Gargi, an eminent scholar on folk theatre, "Though the Jatra is equally popular in Orissa and the eastern parts of Bihar (two bordering states), it originated in Bengal".¹ Kapila Vatsyayan, another scholar in the field also says "The origins of Oriya or Bengali Yatra are somewhat hazy and the discussion has been full of controversies and widely divergent views".² Due to controversies in the matter, Vatsyayan has avoided to pronounce any decision. She has of course traced the origin of dance and drama in Orissa and as per her opinion, *Gita Govinda* — the famous romantic poetry of Jaydev — provided the 'real foundations of poetic, musical and dramatic activity,' for the purpose. Of course she has admitted that dramatic performances gradually developed in the states of Bengal, Bihar and Orissa, under the powerful impact of *Gita Govinda*.

But the opinions of foreign critics are crystal clear in this matter. Hertel, Konow and Keith have openly declared the impact of *Gita Govinda* on Yatra plays. Keith declares: "As in Jaydev's *Gita Govinda*, we have the literary form of the expression of the substance of the Yatra, lyric songs, and to this must be added, the claims of the music and dance".³ Critic M.L. Varadpande has traced the origin of Yatra play in 'Dev Yatra' mentioned in *Vishnu Dharmotter Purana*. According to this Purana, the deity is taken in procession outside the temple and is followed by dance, music and dramatic dialogues. Subsequently, this has taken the shape of Yatra. It may be remembered that, in ancient Greece, this type of religious processions were arranged during the

annual festival of Dionysus, the famous Greek god. According to the dramatists, this is the origin of dramatic performances there. Varadpande has mentioned about the Rath Yatra, Chandan Yatra and Sahi Yatra of Puri which are still celebrated as a part of this tradition. He further adds: "Historically, the Yatra as a dramatic form, owes its existence to the Krishna Bhakti Cult of Bengal. The dramatic poems such as Jayadev's *Gita Govinda* and Babu Chandidasa's *Krishna Kirtan* (15th century) set the background."⁴

Thus, it has been proved by most of the scholars that Yatra originated from the annual religious festivals initially. *Gita Govinda* is at the root of 'Krishna Yatra' and this most popular medium of mass entertainment originated from it. Though most of the scholars like Keith, have accepted *Gita Govinda* as the primary source of Yatra, none of them have admitted clearly that Krishna Yatra actually originated in Orissa. Not only that—Sri Chaitanya, the religious saint of Bhakti Cult of Bengal, has been designated as the father of Krishna Yatra of Eastern India. For this, descriptions from *Chaitanya Bhagbat* written by Brindaban Das and *Chaitanya Charitamrit* by Krishna Das Kaviraj have ample references. It is said that after returning from Gaya in 1507 A.D. Chaitanya Dev arranged a yatra-play called *Rukmini Haran* (Abduction of Rukmini) in the house of one Chandra Sekhar where he himself took the role of Rukmini. His followers acted in different roles. The performance was successful and was hailed by the audience. Ashutosh Bhattacharya, an eminent critic of Bengal, has accepted this to be the first Yatra play of Bengal.⁵ According to Varadpande, this performance gradually created a friendly atmosphere for various Sanskrit dramas, based on Krishna theme. After this, Chaitanya's followers like Ray Ramananda and Rupa Goswamy wrote their dramas based on this theme. Gajapati Pratapendra Dev, the then ruler of Orissa was also encouraging these activities of the Vaishnavas. 'Yatra owes its origin to this atmosphere,' opines Varadpande.⁶

But the fact that Ramananda wrote his *Jagannath Ballav Natak* after having been influenced by *Rukmini Haran*, is not true. Because, *Gita Govinda* was being enacted in the temple premises from 12th century onwards regularly in Puri. Ray was a regular witness of this performance. Not only that, Shankar Dev, the saint poet of Assam, visited Puri during the 15th century. He witnessed these performances there and conceived *Ankya Nat* in his own land. He wrote six plays called *Chinna Yatra*, *Kalidaman Yatra*, *Kaligopal Nata*, *Rukmini Haran Nata*, *Parijat Haran Nata* and *Patni Prasad Nata* — mostly based on Krishna theme — and staged all these there. Also he carried with him

the idea of *Bhagabat Ghar* — a place for community gathering in Orissa — to his state and renamed it as *Namghar* and established them throughout Assam which still exist. Shankar Dev thus carried with him the idea of Krishna Yatra from Srikhatra, Puri. Admitting this, Varadpande says: 'Shankar Deva seems to have been influenced by the earlier Krishna Theatre that flourished particularly in the Utkala and Mithila regions. Puri was a great centre of Vaishnava Theatre in Eastern India. Apart from the *Gita Govinda*, plays like *Parijat Haran Natak* by Gopinath Sandhi Bigratik, *Pravabati* and *Parijat Haran* by Kavichandra Ray Divakar Mishra were being performed in the Jagannath Temple on festive occasions. He must have seen these performances during his one-year sojourn at Puri around 1490.⁷ When Krishna Yatra was regularly performed before Lord Sri Jagannath in Puri Temple during the 15th century, then how can Sri Chaitanya be its originator?

Vatsyayan has always mentioned about the contribution of Bengal, Bihar and Orissa in this field and carefully did not mention the primary role of Orissa in this field avoiding a confrontation, or without going to the root of the evidence. Otherwise, when so much of clear evidence is available, why does she hesitate so much to issue a clear verdict? Though she has tried to understand the literature, culture and religious trends of Orissa enthusiastically, yet her statement is not always flawless. She has described Sarala Das's *Mahabharata* in Oriya to be a translation of the Sanskrit *Mahabharata*, which is not a fact. Also she had to wait for a long to declare that Jaydev was a poet from Orissa. Similarly Balwant Gargi describes Ramananda to be a follower of Sri Chaitanya which is not true actually. It has also not been clearly admitted that Umapati's (1324 A.D.) *Parijat Haran* and Vidyapati's (1430 A.D.) *Gorakhya Vijay* were greatly influenced by *Gita Govinda*. Though *Gita Govinda* is being acknowledged as the first instance of the ancient Yatra tradition, it is a pity that scholars continue to acknowledge Bengal as its first place of origin.

We must remember that the dramatic tradition originated by *Gita Govinda* had a rich tradition behind it. Utkal, the land famous for its proficiency in various arts, had a rich tradition of both rural and urban theatre at least from the 1st century B.C. Mahamegha Vahan Kharvela, the then emperor of Kalinga, was himself a great lover of dramatic performances and he encouraged this art amongst his subjects. For this purpose he erected pandals throughout his kingdom where regular performances of 'Samaj' (Theatrical activities) were being arranged. This is known from his 'Hatigumpha' (Elephant cave) inscriptions where he declares: "*Truteeye punah varsh gandharva vedavudhab*

darpa nrutyageeta vaaditra sandeshakaishtuv samaj karanaabhishya kreeddyati nagarim". This is the description of the emperor's activities during the third year of his rule, where he has openly declared himself to be proficient in the dramatic art and also an arranger of 'Samajas' throughout his kingdom. Also in the next few lines of this inscription he has told how he erected the pandals (*chatvar*) for these regular performances. In this connection we may say that 'Samaj' is still used in Orissa as a synonym for dramatic performances. Moreover, in the Charyapadas, references regarding *Budha Natak*, *Nata Petika* and *Swang* indicate how during the 9th-12th centuries, theatrical activities were rampant in Orissa.

Jaydev was inspired certainly by this rich tradition and has written his immortal Kavya accordingly in the 12th century. Another remarkable element in this Kavya is its marvellous musical quality. The poet was writing a Kavya in Sanskrit and we know that the musical side of Sanskrit Kavyas are very poor. The poet knew very well that music was the only element which would popularize his work among the common masses. Hence he borrowed this element from the folk media, in which Orissa had a very rich tradition, and used it in his Kavya. All these pieces of evidence prove how theatrical performances were prevalent and popular in Orissa from the olden days.

Sarala Das, the immortal poet of the 15th century, has referred to dramatic performances in his voluminous work *Mahabharata* in various places. In 'Virata Parva' he writes:

*Abe Virata je dese rangasabha nahin
Jatra Utsaba Yebana dese na huai
Yebana deshare puni nahin yaga yagana
Janiba se desha nische asuranka bhogya (Virata Parva)*

O Virata, a country which is devoid of pandals and cultural activities, where theatrical performances like Jatra and other festivals are not celebrated, where sacrificial ceremonies are not being held, must be a country inhabited by uncivilized demons).

This proves that Jatra was not unknown to this area in the 15th century.⁸

Analyzing all these pieces of evidence together, we can safely conclude that from Kharavela's time, theatrical performances were a regular phenomena in Orissa. Two parallel streams of these performances must have existed, one for the elites and the other for the common masses. Unfortunately, no elite drama of the time is traceable.

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As orality is the specialty of folk literature, obviously no specimen of folk plays is also available. But depending upon presumption, it can be said that performances in those days must have been in the language of the common people. Kharavela used the language of the people in his inscription. He must have encouraged this in the area of theatrical performances also. As these performances were being held in the Chatvaras (Pandals), specially erected for this purpose, these must have been open-air performances. Proscenium stage system was unknown to the people then. Kharavela's Udaygiri's Ranigumpha stage or Sitabenga's cave stages were only open-air stages. The performances held there hence may be accepted as Jatra performances at least in an earlier stage of Jatra, in the 1st century BC.

Long before Vaishnavism found its roots in the stage, theatrical activities were regular phenomena here—whether it was known as 'Samaj' or 'Jatra' is not important. Of course, evidence regarding theatrical performances to be known as 'Jatra' are available. Jatra of Orissa is not an imitation of the Bengali Jatra. At least history does not support this view.

In order to prove the relation of Jatra with Sri Chaitanya some scholars have misrepresented the real fact. Writes Varadpande: "Followers of Mahaprabhu like Ramananda Rai and Rupa Goswami wrote plays on Krishna theme."⁹ From this remark it is understood that Chaitanya inspired Ramananda to write his maiden play *Jagannath Ballav Natak*. But this statement is not true. Krishna Das Kaviraj, the author of *Chaitanya Charitamrita*, clearly writes.

The saint Chaitanya was deeply charmed with the devotional works of Chandidas, Vidyapati, *Gitagovinda* and especially the dramatic work of Rai Ramananda.¹⁰ Evidence is also there for the fact that *Jagannath Ballav* was performed in the temple premises and the saint took active part in it. Chaitanya came to Orissa in 1510 A.D. where as *Jagannath Ballav* was written in 1509. Rai was then the governor of Rajmahandri — the southern border of the Gajapati kingdom. The saint could meet Rai only after 1510. There is no evidence that Rai was inspired by the saint to write this drama.

We have mentioned earlier that *Rukmini Haran*, in which the saint himself acted, is the first Bengali Jatra as claimed by the Bengali critics. Balwant Gargi also supports this view. He writes: "This (*Rukmini Haran*) is the first historically known instance of a performance of Bengali Jatra".¹² Oriya Jatra originated much before that. Leaving aside all other evidence, the instance of *Gita Govinda* may be taken into consideration which inspired saints and poets of other parts, in their dramatic activities.

We have tried here to trace the origin of the Oriya Jatra. We do not know exactly when this powerful medium of mass entertainment came to be known as Jatra. But at least one thing is clear— that it was widely known under that name during Sarala Das's time (15th century). This was at least a century before Chaitanya's arrival in Puri and the appearance of Krishna Jatra in Bengal. Puri was a centre of cultural activities much before Chaitanya's visit and at least from Jayadev's time, theatrical performances were undertaken here and in its adjacent areas.

Jatra was just a part of the rich and ancient cultural tradition of Orissa. Hence, there is no reason why it should be treated as a parallel creation of Bengali Jatra which actually originated much later i.e. during the advent of Saint Chaitanya Dev, as has been admitted by the Bengali scholars. The Oriya Jatra neither grew up under the protective shadow of Bengali Jatra, nor was it influenced by the same. However it must be admitted that Oriya Jatra came in contact with Bengali Jatra during the 19th century and since then it has always depended upon it for inspiration. But then, that is a separate issue.

References

1. Gargi, Balwant (1991) - *Folk Theatre of India*, pp 13.
2. Vatsyayan, Kapila (1973) - *Traditional Indian Theatre*, pp 173.
3. Keith A.B. (1951) - *Sanskrit Drama*, pp 272.
4. Varadpande, M.L (1992) - *History of Indian Theatre*, pp 194.
5. Bhattacharya Ashutosh (1946) - *Folklore of Bengal*.
6. Varadpande (1992) - *Op. cit.* pp 197.
7. Varadpande, M.L. (1994) - *Krishna Theatre in India*, pp 76.
8. Mohanty, A.B. (1972)(Ed) - *Sarala Mahabharat*, Birat Parba, Sudha Samkaran.(Oriya)
9. Varadpande (1992) - *Op.cit.* pp 197.
10. Krishnadas Kaviraj - *Chaitanya Charitamitra* (Bengali)
11. Gargi (1991) - *Op. Cit* p. 15.

Two Dystopian Fantasies

Nilanjana Bhattacharya

If the first woman that God ever made was strong enough to turn the world upside down all alone, these women together ought to be able to turn it back, and get it right side up again!

— Isabella Van Wagener¹

This is a venture to analyse an English short story and a Bangla one—“Sultana’s Dream” (1905) by Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain (1880-1932) and “Ulatpuran” (1927) by Parasuram (the penname of Rajsekhar Basu, 1880-1967), respectively. Both these texts deploy the device of Utopia in two different ways. The former turns the gender hierarchy upside down, while the latter reverses the colonial hierarchy

Both Parasuram and Rokeya were writing in colonised India, or, to be more precise, in colonised Bengal. The sun of India’s Independence set in Bengal at the Battle of Palasi (better known as Plassey); and it was again in Bengal where the so-called ‘enlightenment’ first dawned, along with the commencement of English education. Both Rokeya and Parasuram were exposed to this ‘enlightenment’ and English education. Keeping this background in mind we will strive to analyse these texts, and relate the texts to the contexts.

Both these stories depict realistic pictures of exploitation; only the hierarchy has been reversed. We will begin with the question, despite the discrepancies between the two texts, why did both Rokeya and Parasuram deploy this particular method? To answer this question

1. Excerpts from Isabella Van Wagener’s speech in Ohio in 1851 cited in Schmittroth & McCall eds, *Women’s Almanac*. New York: UXL, 1997. p. 17

let us first check up the discord between the real situation and the situation that has been delineated in these two stories.

"Sultana's Dream" depicts a 'Ladyland' where men are being dominated by women, exactly in the same way as they dominate women in real life. Men are confined in the 'mardana' — that is, the masculine form of 'zenana' — to do the household chores. Women, besides bossing the men in the house, also control the state-affairs. As a result, 'Ladyland' is free from sin and harm. Virtue herself reigns here."²

"Ulatpuran" opens with an "Indo-Anglian" (not Anglo-Indian) primary school, where a student Dick reads in History— "The wretched days of Europe are gone.... Europe has been gratified by taking shelter 'under the soothing influence of the big rod' of the all-powerful Indian government."³

On getting the 'Ladyland' in her dream, the first-person narrator of "Sultana's Dream" feels quite embarrassed at the way women make jokes at her. Her sister and companion Sara explains —

"The women say that you look very mannish."

"Mannish?" said I. "What do they mean by that?"

"They mean that you are shy and timid like men."

"Shy and timid like men?" It was really a joke."

(343)

And a joke it is, because in real life, the attributes like 'shy' and 'timid' are ascribed to women, and not to men. These are essentially 'feminine' features, neither expected nor appreciated in men. The first thing Rokeya does is to invert the very concept of 'masculine' and 'feminine'; and thereby, highlights the fact that these concepts are mere constructions, fabricated by and in favour of the 'powerful' sex. Women are generally regarded as the weaker sex, and therefore, deserved to be dominated. But Sister Sara's argument seems to be quite logical — "A lion is stronger than a man, but it does not enable him to dominate the human race." (344) She explains how the women in the 'Ladyland'

2. Hossain, Rokeya Sakhawat. *Sultana's Dream*, in Susie Tharu & K. Lalita eds, *Women Writing in India: 600 BC to the Present*, Vol. 1; Delhi: OUP, 1993. p. 343. (All the quotations from this text are from this edition. Page Numbers are given after the quotations.)

3. Basu, Rajsekhar. 'Ulatpuran' in *Parasuram Granthavali*. Kolkata: M.C Sarkar & Sons, 1969. p. 122 (All the quotations from this text are from this edition. Page Numbers are given after the quotations. Translations are the mechanical effort of the present author.)

reversed the gender hierarchy not by physical power, but by intellectual power. They invented a 'wonderful balloon' which could draw as much water from the atmosphere as they pleased and thus prevent rain and storms in the 'Ladyland'. They also invented an instrument which could collect and store as much of the sun's heat as necessary. To this extent the story resembles science fiction.

We could get a glimpse of the actual situation in colonial Bengal from Brooks Adams' *The Law of Civilization and Decay*. It says — "Very soon after Plassey, the Bengal plunder began to arrive in London, and the effect appears to have been instantaneous, for authorities agree that the 'industrial revolution', the event which has divided the nineteenth century from all antecedent time, began with the year 1760 ... Plassey was fought in 1757, and probably nothing has equalled the rapidity of the change which followed...Possibly since the world began, no investment has ever yielded the profit reaped from the Indian plunder, because for nearly fifty years Great Britain stood without a competitor."⁴ A number of India's indigenous industries were destroyed by the British in order to procure our raw materials and to expand their market. But in the topsy-turvy world of "Ulatpura", a newspaper reports — "The entire Europe is being exploited incessantly, yet it is not satisfactory enough. O Britain...Just think about the condition of your merry England which was once flooded with the waves of milk and honey....Your breads are made by imported wheat...India's cotton industry has destroyed your linen industry.... Upon your ruin India has erected its temple of luxury." (129) Parasuram has also reversed the cultural imperialism. When in reality the Indians were imitating the colonisers' dresses, food habits and everything else in order to become Indian by birth but English at heart, Parasuram depicts an English boy Tom as wearing 'dhoti' to become as 'civilized' as a Bengali. English children are striving to read Bangla novels and learn Urdu ghazals, for these are symbols of status. The characters like Sir Tricky Turncoat, Lord Blurny, Gobson Tody and Prince Bhom (the names actually evince their characteristics) remind us about some of the mock-freedom-fighters of India, who were more eager to satisfy their selfish ends rather than to win Independence.

In order to justify their exploitation of India, the British colonisers have always regarded Indians as barbarians, devoid of any knowledge or education and always pretended that it is for the sake of their

4. Adams, Brooks. *The Law of Civilization and Decay*. New York: Macmillan Company, 1903. pp. 313-317

Christian evangelising zeal that they have come to 'enlighten' India. Parasuram depicts a similar situation; only that it is the Europeans who are regarded as barbarians, diversified and fond of civil strife, and India is bestowed with the evangelical qualities to 'enlighten' Europe. In this inverted world, Europe's demand for autonomy is ridiculed by saying that they have never known what independence is. They were always under the dominance of either the Romans, or the Anglo-Saxons or some other nations. They do not have any unity. "It is only the Indian rule that has kept this continent under control. Be a little civilized first and then dream of freedom." (136)

Similarly, "Sultana's Dream", reversing the existing hierarchy, projects men as worthless beings, inferior to women — "...a man has not patience enough to pass thread through a needle's hole even." (345). "Men... are rather of lower morals and so we do not like dealing with them," (351) said the queen of the 'Ladyland'. In reality, women are regarded as inferior to men not only in India, but also outside it. Arthur Schopenhauer (1788-1860) argues in his essay "Of Women" (1851) that — "...woman is not meant to undergo great labour, whether of mind or of the body...they are themselves childish, frivolous and short-sighted, in a word, they are big children in all their life long..."⁵ In *Susilar Upakhyān* (part I & II in 1859, part III in 1860) Madhusudan Mukhopadhyay has depicted the 'ideal' 'should-be' modern Indian woman or 'nabina' through the character of Susila, who spends her whole life in serving her husband and sons, who is constituted according to the demands of the patriarchal society. In "Sultana's Dream," Rokeya has constituted men according to the demands of the matriarchal Ladyland.

The term 'utopia' is generally understood as an imagined form of 'ideal' or superior society. Sir Thomas More coined the word in his Latin work *Utopia* (1516) as a pun on two Greek words — 'eutopos' meaning 'good place' and 'outopos' meaning 'no place'. Thus, 'utopia' usually connotes an 'ideal' society that exists nowhere. Rokeya's 'Ladyland' exists nowhere, but it has been delineated as an 'ideal' land "free from sin and harm"; the citizens there are "...not subject to any kind of epidemic disease — nor did they suffer from mosquito bites...in Ladyland no one died in youth except by rare accidents." (346). And "Since the 'Mardana' system has been established, there has been no more crime or sin..." (349)

5. Schopenhauer, Arthur. T.B. Saunders tr, "Of Women" in *Complete Essays of Schopenhauer*. New York: Willey Book Company, 1942, Book V, p. 72-73

At the beginning of "Ulatpuran" we are informed that the Europeans are gradually prospering, and—"The evangelical Indians, having crossed the seven seas and thirteen rivers, arrived in this inhospitable country to civilize them, and to establish peace and order." (123) In both these cases the situations are imaginary, but scarcely 'ideal'. "Sultana's Dream" cannot dispense of gender hierarchy. "Ulatpuran" does not delineate a society free from exploitations. Had they done it, we could have called these societies 'ideal'. But as they are, we would better call them inverted utopia or 'Dystopia'. Both the stories depict the shortcomings of the society — the gender and colonial hierarchy — and the exploitations of the 'weaker' group of the society. But only the tables are turned. Females are dominating males and India is exploiting Europe. And the methods of these dominance and exploitations are copied from real life as we have already seen in the few instances cited earlier. In fact, like many other Utopian fictions, these are actually satires on contemporary life. Rokeya and Parasuram criticize the contemporary society, but instead of criticizing it directly, they imitate their objects of attack in a reversed manner. In *The Interpretation of Dreams*, Sigmund Freud speaks about the danger of telling "disagreeable truths" against authority... "If he (the author) presents them undisguised, the authorities will suppress his words... A writer must be aware of the censorship and on its account, must soften and distort the expression of his opinion."⁶

Rokeya and Parasuram are not exactly using any disguise, but they are covering their critical faces with a veil—a veil of fantasy and laughter. And this laughter is invoked by the reversal of the gender and colonial hierarchy, respectively. We do not laugh at the 'normal'. It is the violation of the norm, the distortion of the usual pattern that invokes laughter. Since we are used to the norm of men dominating women and Europe ruling over India, the very idea of females' supremacy or India's tyranny seems to us ludicrous. Thus, the authors blend simple fun with biting satire. In his *Satiric Inheritance*, Michael Seidel has argued that, "Satiric action is always double action, a regress in the form of a progress, a presentation in the form of violation." Both these texts are actually "a presentation in the form of violation."

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6. Freud, Sigmund. James Strachey tr, *The Interpretation of Dreams in The Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*. Vol. IV. London: Hogarth Press & The Institute of Psychoanalysis, 1973, p. 142
 7. Seidel, Michael. *Satiric Inheritance: Rabelais to Sterne*. New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1979, p. 23

Violating the prevailing hierarchies, Rokeya and Parasuram point out their demerits. The reversed hierarchy, perhaps, provides the exploiters a taste of the bitterness of their exploitations. In other words, the stories actually depict "another world, and yet the same". They paradoxically emphasize on fantasy and reality. The situations they depict are imaginary, but the problems are very much real. This emphasis on reality becomes evidently manifest when in "Sultana's Dream" we find a brief allusion to British colonialism in India, and in "Ulatpuran" we encounter a violent procession of women against gender hierarchy. The queen of 'Ladyland' believes women to be superior to men because, she says — "We do not covet other people's land, we do not fight for a piece of diamond though it may be a thousand-fold brighter than Koh-i-noor, nor do we grudge a ruler his Peacock Throne." (351). This is, needless to say, a direct reference to the British plunder in India. In "Ulatpuran," a women's newspaper, *The She-Man*, demands: "In what sense are we inferior to men? We will do away with men completely, for there isn't another race in the world as crooked and selfish as men. They believe that this world has been created only for men. Even their God is a male....O Ladies, you are no longer the helpless, innocent, 'niminy piminy' housewives....Ward off the worthless men and snatch your own rights from the government." (139)

It is, therefore, evident that both Rokeya and Parasuram are actually attacking the hierarchies, but instead of saying it directly they have taken recourse to fantasy. Although they have presented it in a funny way, not a single blow is missed. The humour appeals not only to our heart but also to our intellect. After laughing at our heart's content, we suddenly pause to ponder what we are laughing at. If it is the hierarchical structure that we are laughing at, then we ought to laugh at the existing hierarchy too. And if we could easily accept the prevailing hierarchy, what is so ludicrous about the reversed situation? Perhaps, it is the light-hearted spirit of fantasy that provides the authors the scope to raise such a question against the social structure.



Asian Englishes Beyond the Canon, by Braj B. Kachru, 2005, New Delhi, Oxford University Press, Rs. 695/-

For the last two decades or so, Prof. Kachru has been presenting the idea of English as a group of languages still holding, without reason it seems, to a common name. That the Americans called their language 'American' (Mencken, 1937, for example) seems to provide support to Prof. Kachru's argument. Here is a definite demand for a new name of a language arguably perceived distinct from the language it arose from, i.e., the 'English English', as Prince Charles once charmingly called it. The British tongue underwent a sea change after its travel to the New Continent, where it began to distance itself from its home form.

Prof. Kachru does not want to go as far as claiming Englishes of Africa, Asia or Australia wholly different languages in the sense English and German are. He still would not mind calling them English. They however are 'different' Englishes, not the same monolithic language any more. Are they different 'dialects' of English then? He does not wish to call them dialects either, since the notion of dialects brings with it the requirement of a standard, a super-ordinate variety—a language that lords over the others and has a much wider functional range than the rest, apart from being the most prestigious of them. Prof. Kachru claims that all these global Englishes have become standards in their own geographical domain and beyond and are vying with the primordial English English in terms of prestige and recognition. Though not strictly defined anywhere, they seem to have a new and higher theoretical status than that of dialects. They are presumably several standard dialects of the same language, located in different regions.

This has to be read along with Prof. Kachru's schema of three concentric circles of English (Kachru, 1982 and 1996). For him, there are three circles of English, each of the latter wider than the former. The 'inner circle', consisting of the native speakers of English in Britain, USA, Canada, Australia, New Zealand and South Africa. Charles A.

Ferguson (1981: xiii) wants to 'quietly drop' the idea of native speaker of the mother tongue from the professional linguist's lexicon. Without entering into an argument on that at this juncture, we shall simply say that these people use the language as their first language. Then there is the 'outer circle', in which countries like India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka etc— all turned anglophone because of the colonized rule of the British for about two centuries. Philippines became anglophone due to its strong American presence. They use English largely as a second and even a 'foreign' language. Finally, there is the 'expanding circle' where countries like China, Japan, Indonesia, Malaysia etc. comfortably figure. The people of these countries have now begun a vigorous campaign for the teaching and learning of English in schools and their use of English is being strengthened and widened in many ways. What is to be particularly noted is that the people of the last two circles have begun using English 'creatively', those of the inner circle doing it more than the members of the expanding one. It is this creative use of English that has prompted Prof. Kachru to pluralize the name of the language.

The learned author divides this book into six parts: Contexts, Convergence, Mantras, Predator, Pedagogy and Afterword. Each has one or more articles on various aspects of the issue, further divided into appropriate sections. He touches upon almost all the countries of Asia, although focus on the Middle East is conspicuously absent. After a brief discussion of several 'national' yet non-native Englishes in the countries of South, South-East and East Asia, he deals with some crucial questions pertaining to its acceptance and use in the countries in question. How different a particular non-native English is from its British or American mould? How is it perceived by those who use it in education, literature and other areas of culture, on the basis of the tensions that it creates in the body of the local language? Is it a language that will bring them deliverance on earth? Is it a killer or predator language, out to destroy their own? If they must learn it, what is the best way to learn it quickly and well? What kind of liberties can they take with it in order to make it their own natural (if not 'native') medium? Prof. Kachru treats these questions with a depth and thoroughness that only a seasoned expert like him can command. This has been his favoured area of inquiry for almost all his scholarly life and he brings in his vast reading and wide-ranging personal investigations to prove this simple point that each of the Asian Englishes is developing for itself a linguistic identity of its own. Most of the articles of this book were published earlier, but all have been reworked on to update

the data and statements and also to bring them together within two covers. Disparate articles have been judiciously organized and made to cohere with one another.

Some of his statements in regard to the above questions deserve citation, which, we hope, will give the readers a valuable glimpse of the direction of his thought. The crisis of identity caused by the acceptance of English and Western culture indiscriminately is, for him, "(t)he continued stronghold of the albatross mythology" (p. 24). He also is critical about "constructs of negativism that make us overlook the socio-linguistic realities about the functions of world Englishes." Elsewhere (p. 68) he quotes Swapan Dasgupta, a noted journalist who was "impatient about India's silly battle over English," without examining the justification of such impatience. He seems to be too harsh when he says that "it is evident that in the past the debate on the forms and function of English is essentially based on mythology and minimalization" (p. 78). At another place he comments that "(t)here is no paucity of literature in Asia and elsewhere which frequently uses aggressive and violent metaphors to represent the social penetration and overwhelming global functions of the English Language. The symbolism of negativity and negative constructs of the 'interloper' language are equally potent and ideologically charged" (p. 175). He however withholds his own comments on the rightness or invalidity of these constructs. But what he says and what he refrains from saying may give us an idea where he happens to stand.

The scholarly integrity and erudition of Prof. Kachru is never in question. I however find one serious flaw in his arguments about several Englishes, be they Asian or African. He only adduces one register, i.e. the language of literary creations, in order to point at the Indian-ness or Malaysian-ness of English. That the authors that have any confidence in them should play and often take liberties with a medium, is but common knowledge. His paradigmatic authors, Raja Rao, Salman Rushdie etc., for example, treat English as their personal and spiritual vehicle, and do not bat an eyelid when they deviate from the strict rules of the English English grammar.

But what about the hundred other functions to which English is employed? Other registers of the language? The register of business correspondence, that used in legal transactions, English that is taught in schools and colleges, that employed in official or administrative communications, in various other publications? Take for example the publication of a journal like *Indian Literature*, or, to take an extreme case, writing a book like *Asian Englishes* by an Asian-American author. Can all this be done in Indian or South Asian English, whose autonomy

Prof. Kachru professes so passionately? He has in this book used sanskritic words like 'mantra' etc., but one doubts if that has made his English an Asian variety. Is there not a somewhat central norm of such registers, some Big Brother and his thousands of less big brothers watching and monitoring the language that is being used in all these domains, so that no serious violation may take place? Is there not, a 'warden' or numerous wardens of English, as Fowler has been described by one of his biographers? Do not most non-native learners of English feel that they are being watched by somebody when they are speaking or writing the language? I do not think Prof. Kachru has been able to establish beyond doubt that English used creatively in South Asia and other such regions can be called another English. Evidence of only one register is not strong enough to obliterate the institutionalization of other, 'formal' registers.

Secondly, I have some reservations about his using terms like 'myths', 'schizophrenia' etc. in discussing notions held about the role of English in Asia, and responses shown towards the language. Nobody can deny that contact with English has been highly beneficial and it worked towards the phenomenal development and enrichment of many Asian languages. But its malignant role also cannot be ignored when its impact on the Asian culture is studied. It had divided the Asian society into two unequally privileged classes, one enjoying the cream, while the other remained in deprivation. The so-called English medium education has contributed a lot to this fracturing of the society. The people that raise these issues cannot be simply condemned as holding on to myths or suffering from schizophrenia. Prof. Kachru, I am afraid, appreciates little the agony of the educational planners who want to educate a huge illiterate mass through the medium of the mother tongue or a language of wider communication, placing English somewhat later in the agenda. I find his use of the above words somewhat biased, a feature not expected from the pen of such an eminent authority.

There are, however, people who do not wish to see English in such a fragmented shape. Crystal (1997, 2003) for example, speaks of "English as a global language" without any plural suffix tagged to the name. He of course uses the word 'Englishes', but seems to accept the idea of English dialects leading diasporic existence in other continents. There are several other people, Tom McArthur (1992) for example, who share this moderate view. The debate, as they say, "is still on", and Prof. Kachru's book will contribute richly to this ongoing debate.

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The Diary of Mademoiselle D'Arvers by Toru Dutt, translated from the French original by N. Kamala, 2005, New Delhi, Penguin India., Pp. xviii + 147, Rs.200/-

This book is one of the curious products of the nineteenth century Indian literary scene for several reasons. In that nascent stage of novel writing in India, a girl of Bengali birth and parentage, a product of the newly introduced British system of schooling, spends some time – four months to be exact – in France, exclusively in the city of Nice, and decides, and manages with a considerable degree of finesse, to write a novel in French, with French characters and settings, speaks as much of the height of imaginative flight/ sympathy of the author, as it provides occasion for reflection on the phenomenon of colonial cringe, and indeed on some of our postcolonial assumptions about mimicry and hybridity. Toru Dutt's recourse to 'foreign fields' to chronicle a love story can also be seen, as GJV Prasad suggests in his lucid Introduction to the volume, as a flight from her oppressive and orthodox native environment that would not have allowed the possibility of the flowering of such a passionate love story. Bengal seems to have a special fascination for France and French literature. A host of Bengali writers, particularly poets and playwrights (one can also include some filmmakers), were profoundly influenced by French literature, and gave fillip to new movements in Bengali literature. In contemporary times, Lokenath Bhattacharya's popularity and fame as a writer in French far outstrips his reputation as an Indian writer writing in Bengali.

Toru Dutt (1856-1877), the precocious genius, belonged to the illustrious Dutt family of Bengal that cultivated English literature throughout the nineteenth century. *Dutt Family Album* is a living proof of the contribution of this family to Indian English Literature. Toru Dutt, despite her comparatively meagre output, has been acclaimed by no less a person than E.J. Thompson as "... one of the most astonishing women that ever lived, a woman whose place is with Sappho and Emily Bronte..." The originator of Indian women's English literary tradition, she is popularly known as the poet of "My Casuarina Tree", arguably the first significant poem of Indian English literature. Though her poems and letters, and her translations of French poems gathered in the collection, *A Sheaf Gleaned in French Fields* had been available

to readers for a long time, her fictions were not so. *Bianca or the Young Spanish Maiden*, her novel in English has been published in book-form only in 2002. Her novel in French, *Le Journal de Mademoiselle D'Arvers* was published in France in 1879, and then went out of circulation. The fact that it had to wait for more than a century for being translated into English and made accessible to Indian readers in general speaks as much about our lack of curiosity in our heritage as the need for archival work in the Indian literature of the nineteenth century.

The novel, written in the form of a journal that allows it to exploit the advantages of the confessional mode, deals with the intimate feelings of its adolescent heroine, Marguerite, the first stirrings of love in her heart for Count Dunois, the elder of the two brothers belonging to the ancient family of Plouraven, and the tragic consequences of that love. Marguerite's journal begins with an entry on 28 August, 1860, followed almost regularly by daily entries, sometimes with a gap of two, three days. So, the reader can closely follow the vicissitudes of her life and the tumults of emotion she experienced through the entries in her journal. The first long gap in the journal, between 30 September and 1 November, 1860, occurs soon after the beginning of the narrative, marking the death of Sister Veronique, Marguerite's teacher in the convent whom she adored. There are two longer gaps in the journal. The first one is between January 23 to April 10, 1861, when Marguerite was fatally ill, following the harsh prison sentence pronounced by the court on Dunois, her fiancé; the second one, that of six months, is bracketed by the entries on 19 May and 23 October, 1861, following Marguerite's marriage when she left Brittany and began to live with her husband in Nice. The last entry in the journal is on January 11, 1862. Before that there is just one entry on January 8 in that year, i.e. 1862 (the English version does not mention the year in the two entries in 1862, though the original French version has the year clearly written at the top of the entries, which is a lapse on the part of the translator/editor that should have been avoided.) Through her narration, Marguerite comes across as a delicate, emotional and spiritually inclined girl at the cusp of womanhood. As the journal-novel opens, she has just left her convent and come to live with her parents, and as it closes after about eighteen months, she has died after giving birth to a child. The significant thing in between is her all-encompassing love for Dunois, Count de Ploverven, a migraine-inflicted scion of an ancient aristocratic family, who kills his brother, Gatson, in a fit of jealous rage, and then

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goes on to serve a long sentence. Marguerite's dog-like devotion to him had made her spurn the love of Captain Louis Lefevre who was deeply attached to her parents and who loved her to distraction. After the Gatson episode Louis reappears on the scene to commiserate with Marguerite and her parents in their hour of distress. Marguerite slowly recovers from her nervous breakdown and protracted illness to find new love in the arms of Louis. She and Louis are married and enjoy an idyllic married life in Nice, till death strikes Marguerite at childbirth. In some ways, the shadow of death hovers over the greater part of the novel, first over the Plouarven household (the bizarre story involving Catherine and the mysterious horse-rider, narrated by the count in pp. 38-39, only accentuates the theme of death) and then over Marguerite. This has often led critics to read Toru Dutt's biography into the novel, as she saw her elder sister Aru die slowly of consumption, and as she herself fell a victim to the same ailment that took away her sister, three years later. It is also a novel about innocence, of adolescent love and heartbreak. Marguerite's naivette is touching in its guileless simplicity, yet intimations of evil are not too far away. Helene, the little daughter of Monsieur Valpoine, informs Marguerite that the count, her idol, is 'wicked'. And when Marguerite visits the castle the count takes her to the underground passage and describes with relish: "It is so dark there and moreover it is said that a murder was committed there by Count Arthur de Plouarven, in the year of the Lord 902. Blood stains can still be seen here on the floor." The characters in the novel are also somewhat predictable except for Dunois and Mademoiselle Goserelles who have been drawn with certain flair and exhibit some complexity.

One must applaud N Kamala's persistent efforts in tracking down the copy of the *Journal* in Bibliotheque Nationale, Paris, and procuring a photocopy for translation. Her English translation is felicitous and readable, and yet retains certain angularities of the original. This is not limited to retaining the proper names in their French forms without anglicising them, as she points out in the Translator's Note, but extends to the style and sentence structure as well. For example, the large number of sentences beginning with the conjunction 'but' immediately points to the French predilection for the excessive use of 'mais'. The following extracts would illustrate this point as much as it would give the reader some idea of the styles of the original and the English version:

30 Novembre. Demain nous partons pour Paris!
 Papa et maman y pensaient depuis quelque temps, mais
 Israelites ne m'en soufflaient moi! Quand papa, ce
 matin, m'a dit, frappant sur mon epaule : "Eh bien!
 petite, va faire tes paquets; nous partons demain matin
 pour Paris!" Je suis restee tout interdite; cela tombait
 sur moi come une bombe; papa s'est mis a rire.

— La voila tout ebahie! Qu'as-tu, petite?

J'ai souri

— Est-ce vrai, mon pere?

—Mais oui, quand je te le'dis!

30 November

Tomorrow we are leaving for Paris! Papa and
 Mamma had been thinking about it for a long time,
 but they had not breathed a word of it to me! When
 Papa told me, this morning, tapping my shoulder,
 "Well, little one, go and pack, we are leaving tomor-
 row for Paris!" I remained dumbfounded; it was as
 if a bomb had fallen on me, Papa began to laugh.
 "Look at her all dumbstruck! What's the matter,
 little one?"

I smiled.

"Is it true, Papa?"

"But of course, when I am saying so to you!"

However, the beauty of the English version has occasionally been
 marred by sentences such as, "Any other would have been offended,
 but you have a good heart..." (p. 77), "Then I heard the door being
 open..." (p. 82), "... but you can be sure that the wishes of an old soldier
 will always be for your happiness, both of your!" (p. 101). One expects
 more rigorous editorial input from Penguin.

Finally, a literary text often contains a referential universe of
 signification recoverable to only the most assiduous and sensitive reader.
 Even such a seemingly casual act of the naming of horses/mares as
 Saladdin and Fatima certainly speaks of the impact of the Muslim
 Spain/Andalus on French culture. We should remember that Brittany,
 where the novel is set, is in the south of France, sharing its borders
 with Spain. The names also call up images of the crusades. In fact,
 crusades do appear nominally in the narrative through Marguerite's
 journal entry on 11 September, 1860. Likewise, Captain Lefevre's
 military assignment in Nice, where he brought his newly married wife,
 Marguerite, reminds one of the wresting of that city from Italy by
 Napoleon III that outraged French Catholics, who had been the leading
 supporters of the Empire, just as his (Lefevre's) earlier assignment in

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Algeria points to the French colonial interest in Africa, particularly the countries of Maghreb. It is surprising that Chris Bader who edited *Le Journal* and wrote a comprehensive introduction to it did not speak of these resonances, and was content to read it in the orientalist paradigm of a supposed pristine Hindu tradition of Vedic and High sanskritic literature.

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Comrade in Arms by Dibyendu Palit, tr. Sahana Ghosh, Rupa & Co, 2004, Pp. 97

The Faces and Other Stories by Dibyendu Palit, tr. Santanu Saha Chaudhuri, Indialog Publications, 2003, Pp.253

The Golden Life by Dibyendu Palit, tr. Sahana Ghosh, Rupa & Co, 2004 Pp. 147

Dibyendu Palit is a renowned, award winning and prolific senior contemporary writer of West Bengal. He has published thirty-six novels, twenty-three collections of short stories, ten collections of poems and four volumes of essays. Leading filmmakers such as Mrinal Sen, Tapan Sinha and Buddhadeb Dasgupta have made excellent film versions based on his fictional writings.

All the above translated fictional texts very clearly illustrate that Palit's mode of writing is definitely translator-friendly. This is indeed a crucial advantage and undoubtedly ensures readability, the primary objective of a written text. As the Bengali source language has very little semantic or cultural links with the target language English, this can often become a daunting task for both translator and reader, for often what is lost in translation is irretrievable. However, what is gained is the fact that the stories can now be shared by a much larger reading community, who are unable to read the Bangla original. The books that I read in translation show how Palit is able to hold psychodrama and docu-fiction in a fine balance, as the contextual inputs in the fictional format exude this very deliberate agenda of weaving fact and emotional history with felicity.

Palit's *Comrade in Arms* (*Shahajoddha*), a novella of 97 pages, is a powerful indictment of a traumatic period in the history of the state of West Bengal and the city of Calcutta. The Naxalite movement of the late 1960s and very early seventies was a very dangerous and tempestuous period for the cultured middle-class in the city of Calcutta. Young men and women were mesmerized by the promises of a cultural revolution and the ideologues and their student followers pursued this flawed dream with fanatic zeal. The stifling out of the movement was as cruel as the machinations of these revolutionaries; at times it was not just worse but much more sordid. This novella is also about perceptions, only this time it is not the perspective of a young woman, but that of a comfortably married middle aged journalist, a father of two bright children and of course a very successful writer.

This very powerful novella that documents a historically significant and extremely volatile time in postcolonial India critiques the Ideological State Apparatus with disturbing objectivity. Louis Allthusser would have been pleased to find that Palit portrays with incisive insight the callous and hypocritical double standards of the police and judiciary, the two iron pillars of the Repressive State Apparatus. Similarly the novel critiques how hypocrisy and double standards have percolated into the fabric of society, stifling voices of protest, and how fear has gagged the mouths of all cultured members of the intelligentsia. Palit's conscientious protagonist is quite similar to the existentialist heroes of Albert Camus. Aditya possesses the courage of his convictions and this attribute is even more striking as he has to loosen the grip of familial sentiment that often compels compromises. Though he loves his wife and children very much, Aditya breaks free from these social commitments and duties that are also about selfish pleasures. Aditya stands up to register his protest, exposing himself to unknown dangers that can even threaten his life. The novel is intensely gripping, traversing the inner workings of a sophisticated human mind, which has to make certain choices in life and may voluntarily take a U turn that may upset the status quo. The reader is reminded of Camus's *Fall* and *Outsider* as Aditya's journey through life is tracked.

The Golden Life is an ironic title, as ironic as Lapierre's *City Of Joy*. This third novel by Palit, includes sharp vignettes of the life of the Anglo-Indian families in postcolonial India, more specifically in Calcutta. It tracks the lives of the Arthur Pybus family, two or three generations living together, leading an abject, joyless life of struggle and powerlessness. As a result the young man turns to minor crimes but

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it leads to his wife Sarah being sexually exploited by the police and other intermediaries. Audrey falls in love with a Bengali man and even marries him and has a child, but she later runs away from the marriage. Many family members and their known ones seem to be moving out of India, migrating to different locations such as Australia, and experiencing a sense of security and stability in the new places. The most remarkable feature of these vignettes is the alien lifestyle of the Anglo-Indians, who seem to remain impervious to the overwhelming presence of the local culture. The families seem to be islands in a stream, maladjusted, shattered or fractured, yet not without a quiet heroism that expresses itself through the way the women so lovingly devote themselves to the cause of family needs and stability in inter-personal relationships. This is the Asian element that the representatives seem to believe in—despite the fact that not only their lifestyles, religion, clothes but even the Christian names make them flow against the current of contemporary times in post-Independence India. So Sarah, Dorothy, Rosalyn and Ashley fight, struggle and sometimes win a pyrrhic victory over their daunting circumstances that are most often beyond their control and merely underscore the sad fact that their plight is so appalling in its futility and lack of any power. It is a rather harsh and unredeemed “golden life” that Palit has sketched.

The Faces and Other Stories is a very powerful collection of short stories and in his Foreword to the collection Ashis Nandy observes with characteristic insight that Palit is a psychologist of the city and sums up succinctly that “the drama of everyday life and the focus on the inner world of the characters, are beautifully captured in the stories in this volume.” Each story is deeply emotive and seems to address some aspect of the micropolitics of everyday life that is driven by double standards, compromises and unfulfilled dreams. The men and women in the stories all belong to the lower middle and upper middle classes of society. All these men and women are ambitious in their own ways, dreamers desiring recognition, romantic members of the bourgeoisie that look upon icons and glamorized images of achievers as the pathfinders and trailblazers that will also draw them into glory and give them an identity. This is what one notices in stories like “Gavaskar”, “Brazil” or even the very sad story “The Birth and Death of Mother Teresa.”

The NRI stories ‘Jetlag’ and “Under a Moonlit Night” have that elusive texture of romantic realism, as Bengalis find themselves caught between the home and the world, the problematics of multiple

residencies, the re-locations that make home in the world away from the home of one's birth, a trial and a challenge. The story "Faces" is about the problem of old age and the responsibilities or indifference of children towards their aging parents who are made to live in old age homes where the attendant describes an offspring coming to meet his resident parent as a "visitor". The last two stories "The Saviour" and "Values" address the issues of ethics and value systems and how flexible these are in the face of a serious crisis, for survival by hook or by crook appears to be the objective; the rest is about romantic idealism of a make-belief world. Survival of the fittest, the craftiest, the uninhibited—that is, those lacking a conscience and commitment to moral values, seem to be the achievers in this postmodern world. Palit's explorations into the lives and minds of his diverse characters define the wide trajectory of social Darwinism that the stories very perceptively graph.

The stories "Advent", "Antara" and "Alam's Own House" once again address the issues of identity and significance in a socio-economic environment that is charged with discrimination and deprivation on many levels. These short stories remind the reader of the deeply disturbing and intense stories of Chekhov, and since I have read both Palit and Chekhov in translation, I feel that successful translation is very effective in negotiating cultures and sharing experiences and ideas. Therefore I would like to congratulate Palit's translators for making a difficult responsibility so very riveting. Dibyendu Palit's translated fiction tells the reader that the creator is a skilled psychoanalyst who maps the stirrings of the unconscious with great perception and understanding. All these are narratives about commitment to the self, society and to relationships, and human conscientiousness plays a predominant role in all of Palit's writings that are rich, nuanced, serious and often rather sad.

Sanjukta Dasgupta

Earthen Lamps by Jhaverchand Meghani, tr. by Vinod Meghani, Pub. Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan, 2004, Pp. 248 + XXXXIII, Rs 160/-
Echoes from the Jeers by Jhaverchand Meghani, tr. by Vinod Meghani, Pub. by the translator, 2005, Pp.336 + XXX, Rs.300/-

Can a nation afford to remain ignorant of its past if it seeks a great future? Can a nation fly high unless it has a firm base to take off from? This base, for a nation, is provided by the tradition and culture and distinct individuality of the people. The past, influenced by evolving historic forces, delineates the present and steers the course of the future. Especially so is it true of India where several strands of distinctive cultures weld into the totality of the essence of *Bharatavarsha*. It is by knowing the parts that constitute the nation that we get a comprehensive vision of India.

The two books, under review originally written in Gujarati by Jhaverchand Meghani, one of the leading literary figures of the first half of the last century, translated into English with exceptional skill by Vinod Meghani, provide us an insight into one facet of the past.

In those days, in large parts of rural India, including Saurashtra, an eye for an eye was the rule that was widely accepted. Slight to one's pedigree were enough to draw blood. While the upper caste people received the benefits of early education and found economic and social benefits in serving the Raj, the lower castes like the Kathis, the Patanwadias, the Rabaris, the Thakardas and the Kharavas remained marginalized. For them there was no hope, no light at the end of the tunnel. Inevitably they turned to crime. Many of them ended up as hardened criminals. Some of them were sent to the gallows, yet they neither winced nor whimpered. They met death, holding their heads high, defiantly defending their honour and dignity.

Crime became part of their tradition. A young man, a Kathi, says:

My prospective father-in-law has sent a word. Unless a Kathi's son performed a productive feat like a theft or a snatch, how could the Kathi bride know if she was marrying a man or a jellyfish?

Living life in the raw hardened the people. Here is a profile of Rabaris, wandering shepherds in the 'glens, the rugged ravines, rocky cliffs and the plains of Gujarat,' harbouring 'thousands of unsolved

mysteries of the gene . . . Multiple bloodstreams have probably blended millions of times to site these Indian communities from those who were aliens once upon a time....' Their ciphered tongue holds the keys to the eras yet not chronicled and to the places yet to be charted.

Who would redeem this marginalized section of people and steer them away from suicidal encounters with the might of the Raj? This was the role that Ravishankar Maharaj, a Brahmin, played with consummate skill in the remote areas of Saurashtra. He said, "I am certainly not a man of politics. I serve the masses." He found the ideal recorder of his exciting encounters in Meghani, 'an observer of folk-life, who had the skill to recreate the folklore of the communities before the readers' eyes, while retaining absolute authenticity.' This confluence of the doer and the recorder breathes an aura of literary merit to the first volume under review.

Maharaj moved around on foot, saved many a defiant young man from the gallows. He was trusted by the locals and also by officialdom. This is best perceived from the move he made to dispense with the system of roll-call that 'degraded human beings to the bottom of the pit. Every member of this community was branded a criminal from the moment of birth.' He pleaded with the officials, to scrap the procedure. The Commissioner demurred, "I can suspend the roll-call for everybody with a stroke of my pen, but you won't achieve anything by that."

"What do you suggest?" he asked.

"Do it in such a way that they feel grateful to you. Tell them only those whom you recommend will be exempted from the roll-call. That way others would also come into your fold."

How bravely Maharaj walked into terrain where bandits held their sway is best seen in this extract. (This happened a few months before Sardar Patel launched the Bardolai Satyagraha for tax exemption for peasants who had faced drought conditions for long).

"Who're you?" the outlaw asked Maharaj.

"Didn't I tell you I am an outlaw?"

"Of whose gang?"

"Of the gang of Mahatma Gandhi. I am here to teach you the ethics of an outlaw.

A true outlaw should fight against foreigners. If you want to be true outlaws, come with me to Mahatma Gandhi. He is the only one fighting for the good of us all."

The British confiscated goods when tax was not paid, but finally scrapped the punitive tax and asked the peasants to collect the confiscated goods. This led to a very amusing situation.

"Hey you Patidar, take back your confiscated millstone."

"I've given it to the government to grind."

"Yes, but now we're supposed to return it."

"Then bring it back to my home."

The millstone was brought back to his home.

"You can't just dump it. Place it properly if you want to return it. Place it exactly where it was. And arrange its accessories just as they were."

The Patidar accepted the restoration only after it was placed exactly as it was. The courage the Patidar displayed owed much to the confidence breathed into the people by Maharaj.

The book is full of several such exciting stories, each etched skillfully by the author.

The same setting of Gujarat provides the backdrop for the second book, a novel, in which the conflict between the officialdom, whose chief protagonist is a police officer, Mahipatram, a Brahmin who seeks the comforts and the facilities that the office extended to him, and the fiercely independent members of the lower castes. The novel brings out how a low caste woman saves the officer's daughter from almost certain death. The woman's husband Rukhad Sheth sought out retribution when his honour was questioned. It started one day when he accompanied the maharaja of Rupgarh on a hunt and saved his life from a charging lion.

"Bravo Vaniya man, bravo to the one who mothered you," the ruler commended the action, "Sire," said one of the courtiers, Kana-Bhai Patel, "The sapling of this gallantry is said to have sprouted from a Kathi seed." "Kana Patel, if I am born of a Kathi seed, it can't be undone. However within six months from now when I hound you out and shoot you dead, do believe that I come from the purest Vaniya stock. And maharaj, sire, let me tell you in advance that during the next six months, when either he or I are killed, please don't look for the killer. Please pardon the one then alive," Rukhad Sheth quivered with anger.

He carried out the threat, ended on the gallows, but his wife kept his image alive. Pinaki, the grandson of Mahipatram, 'gradually came under her influence and got ideas of liberalism that drew him to the side of the deprived and the oppressed and finally brought about his marriage with Pushpa, his childhood friend, who belongs to another caste.'

The story is told with verve. The narration is smooth and captivating; the style is richly textured with allusions and witticisms. Here is one exchange that shows how deft verbal parries can be.

The village schoolmaster was scrubbing soaped clothes. "Mastersaheb," broke in the peon of the thanedar-saheb. "I can understand your washing the kid's rags. But must you do the wife's garments too?" "Has he a choice?" flaunted the orderly of the jamadar-saheb. "One yell from his wife and his legs would give away."

Equally fascinating though pitiable is the picture of a tribal woman who carries the personal belongings of Pinaki when he is sent to Rajkot for education.

An infant about ten months sat in the woman's armpit...sucking her dried up and shriveled breast that looked like a pigeon mauled dead by a torn cat. ... One of her sagging breasts hanging out of the lower part of her blouse looked like a soiled leather pouch glued to the skin, totally unrelated to the rest of her body.

The books hold fascinating insight into the social, political and economic conditions of Saurashtra in the first half of the last century. Thus they qualify to be part of the literary treasure trove of India's past.

R.K. Murthi

Melting Moments: A Collection of Punjabi Short Stories by Raghbir Dhand, tr. by Rana Nayar; Unistar, Pp.220, Rs 295/-

Ravinder Ravi, a well-known Punjabi expatriate writer, seems to echo the sentiments of other writers like him when he says, "Writing (in Punjabi) for me is neither a hobby nor a passion. It is a hunger, a necessity of life, like the yearning to live, a habit, the physical need to breathe. My conviction is that writing is the author's creative personification and his perceptive experience its spinal chord." As one reads *Melting Moments*, a collection of short stories by Raghbir Dhand, translated into English and introduced by Rana Nayar, one realizes the depth of Ravinder Ravi's observations. Most expatriate writers are terribly homesick and write about the country of their origin but in the language they speak in the country of their adoption. These expatriate writers stick to Punjabi, perhaps as a desperate means to retain their links with the mother country.

To put these writers in their context one would have to know a bit about the history of Punjabi literature. So, even before I finished reading the stories in *Melting Moments*, I picked up a copy of *A History of Punjabi Literature* by Sant Singh Sekhon and Kartar Singh Duggal (Sahitya Akademi, 1992). As the stories in *Melting Moments* moved me deeply and I felt sure that there must be quite a few expatriate writers like Dhand, I expected a section devoted to them. The fact that they are disposed of in Appendix 1A: "The Punjabi Writer Abroad" was a little disappointing. Maybe later critics and literary historians would discuss these writers in greater detail and accord them their rightful place in the literary tradition of Punjab, just as diasporic/expatriate writers of Indian origin writing in English have been given their place in Indian literary tradition and their writing prescribed as texts for students of English literature.

In his Introduction to the stories in *Melting Moments*, Rana Nayar gives the reader a short biographical sketch of Dhand, the conditions he wrote in (which therefore determined his choice of themes) along with a critique of the stories that make up the book. What comes across is the sincere and persistent effort of a man who "... constantly sought to negotiate the complex, ghettoized, feudal Punjabi identity through the mishmash of racism, politics of exclusion/identity/language and culture." This has been kept in mind while selecting the stories for the collection under review so that only those "...that deal exclusively with

the problems of dual cultural identity" find a place in the book. According to the translator, they are not necessarily Dhand's best works, a view that this reviewer has to accept, not having read any other works of this author.

There are fourteen stories in the book and as one sees them listed, one notices that the caption 'Contents' is missing. The very first story takes the reader into the world of a small but successful businessman and his wife who can afford an English shop assistant. The relation between the shop assistant and Urvashi, the owner's wife, is a sort of reverse colonial one. She gives him enough to eat but sees to it that he is always kept on his toes. Is it because some of these expatriates in the early years of their stay in England, were given the same treatment? When the narrator tells Peter that he can start his own business with the experience gained in the shop, Urvashi reprimands him, "Look, you shouldn't give such ideas to Peter. He's a straightforward chap.... But if he were to start picking up such dangerous ideas, he'd stop working for us."

Humour and gentle irony make most of these stories stand out and like the scorpion's sting, the ironical twist comes at the end. Like the story titled "Dustbin" which has one wondering about the title, till one comes to the end. And then—a flash of understanding! Anyone who has had the occasion to interact with expats would be ready to vouch for their hospitality. I still remember the time my husband and I went to London in the mid eighties. When we got off at Heathrow, our host was nowhere to be seen. A phone call brought on an apology—he had overslept and it would take him at least an hour to get to the airport. An Indian gentleman who had overheard the conversation, came up and invited us to his 'small house' in Southall. He wouldn't take us for an answer, took us home, made us comfortable and gave us lunch. However, sometimes hospitality can be misused as in the case of this story. The sensitive writer, a character in the story, notices it and tells the narrator so in an allegorical way. The irony is that the narrator, though an aspiring writer, fails to comprehend.

Many old people whose children have settled abroad refuse to join them, saying that they would rather stay on in India which is familiar. First generation immigrants in UK feel the same way when they are too old to work. However, for them coming back is not the answer as they feel like aliens in the villages they migrated from. The first generation immigrant is always lost between two worlds—the country of his or her origin to which he or she cannot go back and the country

of adoption which he or she still has to get used to. 'The Leaves of Acacia' brings out this dilemma rather poignantly.

The immigrant's world is a lonely one. So persecuted is he by the feeling that he craves companionship constantly. To quote the narrator of "Marshland", "In Hindustan, it's hunger that kills you and in England, it's loneliness. Even after fording the seven seas, this journey of hunger has not ended. The stomach may have been filled, but the soul continues to groan in hunger." The cold and snow aggravates the sense of isolation and loneliness, especially as it brings the memories of warm, sunny fields of Punjab. The immigrants find it difficult to come to terms with a country where the people are as old as the weather.

Most of Dhand's stories are man-centred. Just when one wonders how the immigrant women respond to the situation, one comes across the story "Snowbound in London" which is mostly about a woman called Channo whose husband is in hospital after having been mugged. She is very scared on her way back from the hospital when she sees four white children throwing snowballs at each other. Her daughter Jassi is more composed, more at home in the new milieu. The second generation immigrant is always more well-adjusted than the first, more determined to do one's own thing. One remembers the young Punjabi girl in *Bend it Like Beckham* who is determined to be a good football player. So Jassi does not mind taking a cab late at night because all the buses are cancelled whereas her mother gets extremely nervous at the very idea.

A number of issues are taken up in the stories and the author approaches them directly without beating about the bush. One is aware that Asians — Indians and Pakistanis — feel close to each other without politicians around them trying their best to fan feelings of separatism. In "No Exit" one sees the possibility of an affinity with people of Jamaican origin who have been colonized in their own country and suffered racial discrimination in England, like Asians.

"All of us are aware how Operation Bluestar hurt the pride and piety of Sikhs all over the world". "The Canker" explores it obliquely, culminating in the assassination of Indira Gandhi, without mentioning any of the actual events, just conveying them through symbols that one cannot miss. I found it one of the most powerful stories in the book, one that hits you sharply especially if you are an Indian and are aware of the events which practically seared through the Sikh psyche.

The translator deserves praise for his commendable effort in translating these stories without letting the prosaic and matter of fact

character of the English language affect their rich, emotional content. In his Introduction, Nayar says that translating the stories has been an enriching and fulfilling experience for him for, through them "... I discovered the other, less known face of England, something only a person of Raghbir Dhand's catholicity could have possibly revealed to us." As mobility of labour increases and people migrate to other countries in search of better jobs, they carry their 'imaginary homelands' with them, especially if they are not the kind of suave professionals who can fit in anywhere with ease and adopt the local culture effortlessly. Diasporic literature has therefore come to occupy a significant place today in the literary tradition of a country.

Purabi Panwar

Do Not Weep, Lonely Mirror by Deepa Agarwal, Mumbai, Frog Books, 2005, Pp. 55, Rs.60/-

Deepa Agarwal's *Do Not Weep, Lonely Mirror* is a mosaic of varied experiences of life—the suffering humanity, love and its various forms, family and social life of man, contemporary socio-political cross-currents and the process of poetic creation. The intensity of feeling characterises many of her poems, which are free from any overt intellectualism, so common and obtrusive in contemporary Indian poets writing in English.

From the mid-sixties of the twentieth century, a perspective change has been noticed with the emergence of 'I' (as an assertive self) in the poetry of Indian women poets. 'I' is no longer a male prerogative alone—the new women poets have laid claim to it. Deepa Agarwal through her 'poetry of determination' thinks that women are not going to accept their subordination and submission (like that of Anarkali), which they have replaced by their assertion and independence. She seems to be as subjective as Kamala Das in her frequent use of 'I'. However, she doesn't go deep into the question of gender-bias prevalent in the society. She is a poet of contemporary Indian woman's ambivalences. She doesn't use discontent sexual/morbid terms to assert

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her feelings. Despite her strength, she takes the easy way of immediacy and intimacy of impersonal experience. We wonder if she can express her sentiments to the barest bones. At times she remains at the surface of the problem.

Her poem "Thoughts On A Ritual" begins with a promising note but it ends so soon that it fails to produce any permanent impression on the mind of the readers. She portrays Savitri as an archetype for 'constant wife', 'woman of power' and a 'faithful lover'. There is hardly any attempt on her part to correlate the suffering women with her own poetic self. She is imaginatively and emotionally preoccupied with the indignation of the 'weaker' sex in a patriarchal society. She harkens back to the heroic past of Indian history and digs out the sorrows hidden in the stones of Fatehpur where Anarkali breathed her last. In the impressively crafted poem, "Anarkali" she speaks for the plight of the historical character, Anarkali, the 'slave girl', who dared to love. But her love turns 'fatal':

is breathed up
nothing remains
but the song.

Deepa Agarwal sets apart 'the winds of time' and points out the injustice in love.

K. Satchidanandan in his Preface to the book rightly claims, "her poetry has stood up against women's marginalisation." She expresses her resentment against the oppressive forces of our gender-ridden society. Deepa doesn't throw light on the possible redemption from this suppression of the womenfolk. She leaves it open to the readers.

The title poem of this volume, "Do Not Weep, Lonely Mirror" is about woman's agony and isolation in the world of man. 'Mirror' is female identity/ self for recognition. Femininity, for Deepa, is not just an object—but also a subject of vision and discourse. The title poem records her broad-ranging vision and artistic identity:

...the world might be large
but mirrors everywhere.

Her quest for love, identity, representation and belonging are reflected through richly cultivated and highly expressive elegance. She hovers around a possible world and territory bordering on life:

I am a handful of earth thrown on the highway
and inside me the seed seeking silence crouches
sheltering from clamour of the earth.

(from "I Am a Soiled Paper Rupees")

She claims, "I will grow and be myself / against all odds."
Deepa writes with a 'determination':

I am here. I am I,
call me what you will....
(from "I Will Be Myself")

Her poetry is free from the lilting ranges of romanticism. She puts aside her temporal anxiety and is caught up with something larger than herself. Deepa has deep compassion for humanity and we can only agree with the poet in her musings and hope that all our ventures will help us to respect one another in the family/social domain. In "Your Kargil, Our Kargil" the poet's voice is raised to its full power and comes over skillfully in the roughened movement of the lines of the poem:

Our Kargil was spent
in cushioned comfort
amidst the clatter of tea cups
the shattering images
safely distant.

A basic despondency pervades some of Deepa's powerful poems in this volume. She has a rare gift of transcending the private and achieving a universal dimension in one stroke:

No vacuum this—
this self-contained space
but a singing laughing
fullness, expanding, spreading
unrestrained.

(from "Solitude")

Like, Emily Dickinson, she explores woman's agony, anxiety and isolation against the oppressive powers of modern society.

Deepa Agarwal assumes that the abstract rock carvings in Khajuraho hold true for great poetry. By poetically visualising the world of the

stones she sets both worlds—the world of stone and the world of verbal reactions to the rock carvings in a balance. She makes it clear that she has not visited Khajuraho. But she visits and revisits the absorbing opulence of Khajuraho in dreams. She presents Khajuraho “as permanent as life /as real as death /as tangible as ourselves.” The work of art helps us to comfort the facts of death and indicates the continuity of human life and its abiding values. Life is not reducible to any formula. It seems she is occupied with something much more important than mere description. “A Dream of Khajuraho” ends with a brooding, suggestive image, and it reveals Deepa’s fertile gift for making a dream somewhat presentable before us. In her poetic conception art is not ‘a mirror held up to life’ but something higher than itself.

There are also moments in her poems when meditative silence runs through the lines. The poet goes deep and ventilates her unfathomable philosophical mysteries:

“only
me, me, me,
filling the emptiness.”(from “Solitude”)

In a moment of poetic revelation, she realises that ‘emptiness’ is the only ‘complete’ thing in nature and ‘nothing’ is louder than ‘the silence that speaks.’ The supra-philosophical load of a few poems of this volume may pose occasional problem for an uninitiated reader but once one gets a feel of it one will revel in the marvel of poetry.

Jaydeep Sarangi

Where I Live by Arundhati Subramaniam, Pub. Allied Publishers, Mumbai, 2005, Pp.77, Rs 150/-

Umberto Eco has written a delightful essay called ‘Fragments’, which is set in a fictional time – about two millennia after much of the earth was destroyed in a nuclear explosion. The essay is in the form of a conference paper presented by an archaeologist who lives in the Arctic – amidst what is possibly the only human community left on earth.

Prof. Anouk Ooma researches 'the ancient civilisation' that once flourished on earth and he is especially interested in literary fragments – what do covers torn from books or random lines from poems suggest about that long-vanished civilisation? Well, judging from its jacket, *The Name of the Rose* is "obviously a treatise on horticulture", says the confident Prof. Ooma. But his most exciting find is a small book called *Great Hit Songs of Yesterday and Today*. To him lines like "It's a material world" quite clearly belong to some ode condemning terrestrial concerns. "I'm singing in the rain, just singing in the rain, it's a glorious feeling..." is a notable example of a fertility hymn to nature, and, most tellingly, the lines "Mine in May, his in June. She forget me mighty soon..." suggest, says the professor, "a worthy correlative to some English verses of the same period, the songs of James Prufrock by the poet Thomas Stearns, who speaks of an unspecified "cruellest month."

Eco is demonstrating in his typically sly fashion, the fantastically fallible nature of historical research. We naturally read all historical clues through frameworks we have constructed based on other historical clues. But what if the initial clues were misleading and the frameworks themselves are flawed? What if we've missed the fact that there existed on earth a genre called 'pop music' and that this had nothing to do with the genre called 'modernist poetry in English'? But Eco also seems to be raising the opposite question – namely, isn't it the prerogative, perhaps even the function, of literature – both high and low – to remain essentially mysterious, to not lend itself to the easy generalisations of future decoders?

I was reminded of Eco's essay while reading Arundhati Subramaniam's new book of poems. Her poetry is set at such an angle to the familiar and the everyday (even while its subject matter is consistently the familiar and the everyday) that she may well be writing about mystical experiences – encounters and revelations that would throw the Professor Oomas of the future into a delicious confusion.

Consider these lines from three different poems: 'We are ink and syrup/ and virulent acid./We are the midgets/ who turn in three strides/into lords of the universe./We are here to restore order,/to put the voices – of books, lovers,/teachers, customs officials –/in their places'. And '...you need to be/seasoned sleuth of the undergrowth,/ watchful of every false move/and false note, grizzled performer/who knows that the best lines/are never punched, just/thrown away.' And finally: 'To leave no footprints/in the warm alluvium,/no Dolby echoes/to reverberate through prayer halls,/no epitaphs,/no saffron flags./This was also a way/of keeping faith.' If we didn't know better

we could think up any number of professions for the author of these lines – mystic, alchemist, ascetic, oracle. It would be hard to guess, for those at a few removes from the underground world that Subramaniam inhabits, that all of these are only different ways of describing the significance of poetry through the act of writing it.

Which says a great deal about what has come to form the subject matter of poetry – poetry itself certainly, but also a kind of wide-angled reflection on life where the boundaries between things or their location doesn't matter all that much, a kind of universalism that harks back perhaps to something simpler or a longing for something simpler, more unified, more elemental. The collection has to be read for this point to be adequately understood. But what I mean is – by way of an example – that even though this is not a self-absorbed book of poems, the world figures in it only as a metaphor for the self. Take the poem called 'First Draft', for instance, where the act of writing on paper has become an arduous journey: 'the smudge of blind alley/the retraced step, the groove/of old caravan routes, the slow thaw/of glacier, the chasm that cannot be forded/by image.' Or another poem called 'Another Way' where again the act of writing is transformed – this time the metaphor used is that of being in suspension: a clause 'dips and soars/through air-pockets of vowel,/lingers over the granularity of consonant,/never racing to the full-stop...'

On the other hand, the self is also a metaphor for the world. This is especially evident in the poems about relationships, which again Subramaniam takes apart so she can turn them into something compellingly, even scarily, different. In this case, she probes the subliminal aspect of loving, the animal-like instinct – ancient and intractable – that underpins our feelings for other people. This primal creature metaphor runs across poems. 'And I want to pray for you/in the furry way that animals know' she writes in one poem, and in another wonders how they best she and he could lay their weapons down: 'how to disarm,/how to choose/mothwing over metal,/underbelly over claw,/...even while the drowsing mind still clutches/at carapace and fang'. In a third she knows that love awakens the knowledge of a language that no human tongue has devised: 'What is it about an armful/of animal presence/that makes you feel you could decode/a language that has always seemed/ a little garbled...'

Subramaniam's poems refuse to get tied down to topical concerns. The often eerie and stark landscapes of her poems have something otherworldly about them. There are poems with identifiable locations too – a clutch of lovely childhood poems and some memorable ones

about Bombay, where she lives. On the whole though, she races ahead of the here and now, and is impatient with the niceties of cultural identities – what occupies her are the forgotten basics, the rules that exist in the blood, the need to listen ‘just beneath the skin’.

But these enthusiasms do not unequivocally translate into joy. What binds much of the poetry in this book together is an open-ended quality that could take the form of celebration but just as often results in a deep sense of unease. Doubt is a recurring theme – she uses the word in several poems. And in the end, it’s perhaps this which gives these poems a location and which justifies the book’s title – the underlying feeling that all is not resolved, that perhaps too little is, and that one ought to nevertheless conduct oneself with poise, wit and detachment – and mystery in the Eco-ian sense.

Anjum Hasan

A Thread of life, by Anoop Verma, Srishti, New Delhi, 2005, Pp.238, Rs.195/-

There is something fascinating about the debut novels that excite us in their strange and peculiar ways. Could it be because the author pours in all his pent up emotions into his first work with full force and intensity giving vent to his suppressed creative energy which bursts into a literary bang? Otherwise, how could anybody explain that most debut novels in Indian English go on to become fairly popular among the readers and critics alike, be it *God of Small Things* by Arundhati Roy, or *English August* by Upamanyu Chatterjee or Shashi Tharoor’s *Great Indian Novel*? Personally speaking, this critic has a strong penchant for debut works and has no qualms about being a little biased while approaching any literary debut.

In Anoop Verma’s first novel *A Thread of life*, the storyline revolves around three protagonists whose lives intersect and overlap into one another at different points of time resulting in an intricate web of aspirations, disillusionments and realizations.

Seven-year-old Anirudh who hails from a modest background in

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rural Bihar accompanies a Naga Sadhu to Rishikesh to lead an ascetic life. He stays with him for nearly six years before deciding to quit the hills and come down to Mumbai to lead a 'normal' life. Jyotsna, a fiercely ambitious girl from a Mumbai slum, who eventually marries Anirudh, gets lured by the dreams of a better life and material prosperity—even when the stakes are high. The Naga Sadhu Jungali baba is actually a professor of physics who renounced a comfortable life in Mumbai to seek and realize some higher truth of life — only to come back with a new vision of God and 'enlightened' in a totally different way after years of penance and austerities in the Himalayan foothills.

As the story progresses it will be apparent how the trio took a headlong plunge into the murky waters of destiny and eventually got drowned by the currents of their fate. However, the common thread that joins these characters is that all of them have tried their level best to go beyond the given boundaries of their existence to explore the unknown facets of their life. All of them sought fulfillment in their own myriad ways. One event led to another and finally we found them in a situation which was not their own making but destiny had imposed upon them; proving once again man are essentially helpless products of their own circumstances that surround them. In this tight *A Thread of life* could be seen as a poignant chronicle of love and loss, ambitions and illusions, dreams and realities, spiritual quests and mundane trivialities, hopes and doomed efforts—all fused into creating a mixed bag of surprises, dramatic twists and sudden turns.

Throughout the novel Verma's protagonists seem to be quite ordinary human beings, fragile and vulnerable, highly unsure about themselves, who symbolise the frailty of human character in the face of fear, uncertainty and temptation.

Imagine Anirudh and Jyotsna, the couple who aspire for all the material comforts befitting a cosmopolitan life, making a false deposition before the police in a hit and run case they witnessed—all for a tempting sum of five lakhs. Imagine a system of governance where the police seem too willing to hush up the matter only because it involved one of the rich and influential elites of the society. Set during the time when the entire world was fast shrinking into a vast marketplace and 'individuals' were being seen more as 'consumers' and when words like 'upward mobility,' 'class identity,' 'status,' 'material desire' assumed new meanings and significance in market terms, 'greed' was no longer viewed as a dirty word. Moreover, the new cosmopolitan culture of speed and money warranted that one's morals could also be sold for a price, to the highest bidder. Anirudh and Jyotsna represent these new mantras of survival.

Imagine a seasoned Naga Sadhu who led a torturous ascetic life for many years, deciding one fine morning to abandon his spiritual quest midway to return to Mumbai to lead a 'normal' life. One wonders why it took so long for him to realize that God had to be searched and found within "the basic unity of all universal laws" and not anywhere else.

It is through these characters that the novelist has been able to crack the veneer of human nature, its fluidly, and inherent contradictions, delving deep into the dark and sinister recesses of human psyche and clinically examining the fallibility of human nature in all its rawness.

Life comes full circle and Anirudh's dream of a settled life was shattered when Jyotsna died in a similar hit and run case. A guilt-ridden Anirudh found himself in a fix. Does the tragedy signify an absurd play of the chance factor in one's destiny? Or, could it be termed as reaping the fruits of one's own *karma*? For a crestfallen and shell-shocked Anirudh, perhaps the answer lies somewhere in between. The story reaches a dramatic finale when Anirudh accidentally meets the Naga Sadhu Jungali baba in a completely new avatar who taught him to take life in one's stride and move on.

A Thread of Life establishes beyond doubt that, the entire universe is in perfect unity and life, in its broadest sense, is not bound by any rules of grammar, logic or any fixed set of definitions barring the laws of nature.

Despite the author's sincere efforts the story fails to stand on a firm ground and one is left with an uneasy feeling whether this is a long short story blown out of proportion! The long and monologic flashbacks in the novel sound banal and hamper the smooth flow of the narrative. Though there are moments of illumination, a careful reading of *A Thread of Life* will reveal that it has a somewhat lopsided structure where the story staggers for a long way with sterile and commonplace events before really taking off towards the end.

Superbly brought out by Srishti, written in a simple and lucid prose style, the storyline however lacks the intensity, force and depth of a debut novel.

Or, may be I expected too much.

Durga Prasad Panda



Our Contributors

Asaduddin, M. (b.1959) Writes in Bangla, Urdu and English and translates from and into these languages; also knows Assamese, Hindi and French; teaches English Literature at Jamia Millia Islamia. Add: 90-S, Sector 8, Jasola Vihar, D.D.A. Flats, New Delhi 110 025.

Bandopadhyay, Manohar (b.1944) Poet and critic writing in Hindi and English; has several published works like *Mouthful of Metaphors* (poetry), *Prem Chand—Life and Works* (biography), *Antaral Ke Beech* (poetry collection in Hindi) etc.; recipient of Munshi Prem Chand Award, Ministry of Education Award (twice) etc. Add: Flat No. 6119/5, Sector D 6, Vasant Kunj, New Delhi 110 070.

Bannerjee, Surabhi. Translates from Bengali into English; has published more than 20 books in English and Bengali; her translation of Satyajit Ray's stories and Sunil Gangopadhyay's poems received wide appreciation; presently Vice-Chancellor of Netaji Subhas Open University.

Bhattacharya, Nabarun (b.1948) Bengali poet, short-story writer and novelist; has two poetry collections including *Ei Mrityu Upatyakaa Aamaar Desh Naa*, four collections of short stories and five novels including *Herbert* (which won him Narsingh Das Award and Sahitya Akademi Award), to his credit. Add: A, S-1/1 Golf Green, Phase - I, Kolkata 700 095.

Bhattacharya, Nilanjana. Translates classics of Indian regional literatures into English; her first work of translation, a short story by the late Asim Roy, appeared in a national features magazine while she was still in college; she moved to the U.S. in the late 1980s to pursue a post-graduate degree in Mass Communications at the University of Texas at Austin; her first book of literary translation, a novel by the Bengali author Sirshendu Mukhopadhyay, was a finalist for the prestigious Hutch/Crossword Book Award in the winter of 2004-2005.

Bordoloi, Prashantha Kumar. Translates from Assamese into English.

Chakravarty, Manish. Ex. Professor of English and retired Director of Education. Add: 10, Dharma Vihar, Khandagiri, Bhubaneswar 751 030

Chandrakanta (b.1938) Hindi poet and fiction writer. Her works include *Arthantar*, *Antim Sakshya* (novels), *Salakhon ke Pichhe*, *Suraj Ugane Tak* (short stories) and *Yehin Kahin Aspas* (poetry) etc. Recipient of Jammu & Kashmir Cultural Academy and Haryana Sahitya Akademi Awards and recently, the prestigious Vyas Samman. Add: 3020, Sector 23, Gurgaon 122 017, Haryana.

Chhabra, Sagari. Writer and film director. She holds post-graduate degrees from Washington State University and the University of Delhi; in 2004 she was awarded an Asia Fellowship and spent a year in Myanmar and Malaysia, researching the surviving Indian freedom fighters in South-east Asia; has one poetry collection, *The Professional Woman's Dreams*; she has written and directed ten documentary films and one feature film, winning five national and international awards. Add: C- 203 Defence Colony, New Delhi - 110 024. Email: soch@vsnl.com.

Das, Chandan. Add: Deptt. Of English, S.B. Women's College, Cuttack - 1.

Das, H.K. Oriya critic, dramatist, short-story writer, novelist; authored over 100 books in Oriya and English, besides more than 300 research articles; also writes regularly for radio, television and stage; recipient of several awards including State Sahitya Academy Award, Sarala Samsad Award, etc. Add: Haramani Nibas, Deul Sahi, Cuttack 753 008

Dasgupta, Mrinal Kanti (b.1941) Honorary and retired Professor of Plant Pathology, Visva-Bharati; writes essays in Bangla and English beyond his specialization, on social and contemporary issues as well as poems, short stories, dramatizations and transcreations from Bangla to English and vice versa. Add: Oikos, Simantapalli, Santiniketan 731 235.

Dasgupta, Sanjukta (b. 1953) Indian English poet, critic and translator with three poetry collections to her credit, the latest being *First Language* (2005); recipient of Fulbright Scholarship for 1999-2000; teaches English literature at Calcutta University. Add: 7C Cornfields Road, Calcutta - 700 019.

Dev, Amiya: Eminent scholar and critic writing in English and

Bengali; one of the founders of the Comparative Literature Department of Jadavpur University, Kolkata; retired as Vice-Chancellor of Vidyasagar University, West Bengal. Add: EE-108, Salt Lake, Flat No. 7, Kolkata 700 091.

Dhar, Amitava. (b.1957) Graduated from Government Art College, Kolkata in 1980; participated in a number of exhibitions—both solo and group—in various cities including Kolkata, Delhi and Mumbai; one of the founder members of Painters 80 group; by profession a teacher in South Point School, Kolkata. Add: 25B Tannpukur Road, Kolkata 700 031.

Gogoi, Gonesh Assamese love-poet and dramatist; authored one collection of love poems, *Papori* (The Petals), and four dramas, *Shakunir Pratishodh*, *Daxa Yajna*, *Harichandra* and *Kashmir Kumari*.

Grieco, Steven (b.1949) Poet writing in English and Italian, translator and editor; translates mainly into English; has *Maschere d'oro* (Golden Masks), a collection of 33 poems published in Italian to his credit besides several poems in American, Italian and Indian literary reviews. Email: steven.grieco@gmail.com

Gupta, Jaba M. Has been writing poetry since her early teens;

most of her creative career was spent in San Francisco, USA; the multi-lingual and multi-cultural society of her homeland often provides her poetry with intriguing perspectives on the ethnically diverse society of San Francisco; presently living in Manipal, Karnataka.

Hasan, Anjum. Indian English poet; has been published widely in journals in India and abroad; recently her work has appeared in the anthologies *Confronting Love* and *Reasons for Belonging: Fourteen Contemporary Indian Poets* (both by Penguin) and *Anthology of Contemporary Poetry from the North-East* by NEHU; her debut collection of poems will be published later this year by the Sahitya Akademi; presently working as Programme Executive, at India Foundation for the Arts, Tharangini 12th Cross, RMV Extension, Bangalore 560 080.

Kalita, Arupa Patangia. Assamese fictionist; has published over 10 novels and short story collections including *Mriganabhi* (1987) and *Millanniumor Sapon* (2002); her novel *Aiananta* has been published in English translation by Zubaan (an imprint of Kali for Women) under the title *Dawn* (2004); winner of Bharatiya Bhasha Parishad Award, 1995 and Katha Prize, 1998; teaches English Literature at Tangla College, Assam. Add:

Tangla (Jalukbari), Tangla, Darrang 784 521, Assam.

Kashyap, Abhishek. (b.1977) Hindi fictionist; his stories have been published in several leading magazines and journals of India, and translated into Tamil and Telugu also; works as Asst. Editor, *Naya Gyanodaya*, a monthly literary magazine, published by Bharatiya Jnanpith. Add: B-5/22, Safdurjung Enclave, New Delhi 110 029.

Kumar, Akshaya: Noted literary critic; teaches English at the Department of English, Punjab University, Chandigarh 160 014.

Mulay, Dnyaneshwar. Marathi poet and short story writer with a few collections to his credit; a Civil Servant with Indian Foreign Service. Add: Minister, Embassy of India, Sharkassie, P.B. No. 685, Abou Rumaneh, Damascus, Syria. Tel.: 00-963-11-3347901

Murthi, R.K. Critic, short-story writer and translator; has published more than 1600 middles and over 2000 profiles, book reviews, science-based articles and stories in major newspapers; author of about 60 books; recipient of NCERT Award (twice) and Indo Soviet Cultural Society's Award; presently Secretary General, Indian Society of Authors, 134, Sukhdev Vihar, New Delhi 110 025.

Lipipuspa Nayak: Translates from Oriya to English, with three published works to her credit. Has been associated with film-direction; has directed a short film for television. Add: C/o Prof. R.B. Nayak, Lane - I, VIP Road, P.O. Bhadrak 756 100

Nayak, Ranjita (b.1955) Oriya poet, critic and translator; has published more than 10 books including, *Asanta Aparahna* (poetry anthology), *Oriya Sahityare Nari* (Criticism), besides translations from Bengali to Oriya and English; recipient of Orissa State Sahitya Akademi Award, Upendra Bhanja Puraskar, Gokarnika Samman and Jeeban Ranga Puraskar etc. Add: 1501, Mahanadivihar, Cuttack - 753 004.

Panda, Durga Prasad (b.1970): Writes poetry in English and translates poetry between Oriya and English; widely published in leading journals; recipient of *Indian Literature* Translation Prize. Add: J.M. Colony, P.O. Budharaja, Sambalpur 768 004, Orissa.

Pandey, Udai Bhanu. Taught English literature at Diphu Government College, Karbi Anglong, Assam, wherefrom he retired as Principal. Add: A-31, Mauvilla, Rodali Path, Odalbakra Laiganesh, Guwahati 781 034.

Panwar, Purabi (b.1946) Academic, critic and translator. Teach-

ing at the College of Vocational Studies, University of Delhi. Add: 113 Shahpur Jat, New Delhi - 110 049.

Pillai, Meena T. Writes poetry and criticism in English. Has done notable work in the areas of Gender Studies and Film and Media Studies. Teaches English in Sree Sankaracharya University of Sanskrit, Kalady, at its Trivandrum Centre. As a Fulbright Fellow she did research work in University of Ohio, USA, and as a Commonwealth Fellow, in University of Sussex, U.K and as a Shastri Fellow completed her post-Doctoral research in Concordia University, Montreal, Canada. Author of *Modern American Fiction: The Novel of Terror*. Add: Thaaraattu, Mukkola P.O., Thiruvananthapuram: 695044

Rai, Siddhartha (b.1963) Nepali poet and short story writer; a teacher by profession; has one collection of poems and one of short stories to his credit besides one translation work; Add: Mirik Higher Secondary School, P.O. Mirik, Dist. Darjeeling.

Saikia, Chandana. Add: Sr. Lecturer, Dept. of English, Guwahati College, P.O. Bamunimaidan, Guwahati 781 021.

Samarth, Neeta Sen. A free-lance writer and translator; writes in

Bengali and translates from Bengali into English; her translation of Bimal Kar's novel *Asamay* (Belated Spring, 1999) has been published by the Sahitya Akademi. Add: P 237 Lake Road, Kolkata 700 029

Sanyal, Ashis (b.1938) Bengali poet, critic, novelist and short-story writer; has authored 18 books of poems, 20 books for children, six novels and four collections of short stories, four collections of critical essays and two collections of essays in English; his works have been translated into many Indian and foreign languages; recipient of Kala Bharati Award, Ramkumar Bhuwalka Award, Michael Madhusudan Award etc. Add: 53, Bidhan Pally, Jadavpur, Calcutta 700 032.

Sarangi, Jaydeep. Indian English poet; Chief Editor, *Seva-Bharati Journal of English Studies* (a refereed journal) and Managing Editor, *Indian Journal of World Literature and Culture*; at present working for the UGC Research Project on Contemporary Indian Poets in English; teaches English at Seva-Bharati College, Kapargari-721505, Midnapore(w), West Bengal. E-mail: jaydeep_sarangi@rediffmail.com

Satchidanandan, K. (b.1946): Well-known Malayalam poet and critic; has published more than 20

collections of poetry, 16 collections of translations of poems by Indian and foreign poets, 17 collections of critical essays in Malayalam and English, and edited six collections of poetry (both in Malayalam and English); his works have been translated into several Indian and foreign languages; recipient of Kerala Sahitya Akademi Award, Gangadhar Meher Award, Kumaran Asan Award, Vayalar Award etc.; presently Secretary, Sahitya Akademi, New Delhi.

Sen, Bhaskar. Poet and artist; has two collections of poetry to his credit; held more than six solo shows and ten group shows in Mumbai and New Delhi. Add: 504, Aravali Apartments, Kaushambi, Ghaziabad 201 010

Singh, N.P. Indian English poet with two collections of poetry; translates both prose and poetry from Hindi into English. Add: C4-D/46-C, Janakpuri, New Delhi 110 058

Syiem, Esther. Writes poetry in English. Add: Moor-Ville, Riatsamthiah, Shillong 793 001, Meghalaya. Email: esyiem1@rediffmail.com, 2547775 (0364)

Tamang, Aswini (b.1975) Writes short stories in English and translates from Nepali to English; teacher by vocation. Add: Orange Lake School, Mirik 734 214, Dist. Darjeeling.

Thomas, A.J. (b.1952): Indian English poet with one collection of poems to his credit; also translates poems, fiction and plays from Malayalam into English and vice-versa; recipient of Katha Award and AKMG Prize; presently working as Asst. Editor, *Indian Literature*, Sahitya Akademi, Rabindra Bhavan, 35 Ferozeshah Road, New Delhi.

Thomaskutty, L. Noted young Malayalam poet with one collection. Teaches Malayalam Literature at the University of Calicut, Kerala. Presently, on a Fulbright Scholarship, doing research in California, USA. Add: Dr. Lazer Thomaskutty, Senior Lecturer, Dept. of Malayalam, University of Calicut, Pin 673635.

Venkiteswaran, C.S.: Critic and translator; deeply interested in film studies and environmental studies; won state and national awards for documentary films; Research Faculty, Centre for Taxation Studies, Pappanamcode P.O., Trivandrum 695 018.

Unni R. Young Malayalam short story writer with one collection. Noted for his work on Malayalam authors during his tenure as Associate Editor of the literary magazine *Karppooram*. Working now as Producer, Asianet, Thiruvananthapuram. Add: Unni R., C/o Asianet Studios, Puliyaikonam P.O., Trivandrum.

STATEMENT ABOUT OWNERSHIP AND OTHER PARTICULARS ABOUT INDIAN LITERATURE

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I, K. Satchidanandan, hereby declare that the particulars given above are true to the best of my knowledge and belief.

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K. Satchidanandan
Publisher

FROM THE EDITOR'S DESK

Modern India as a nation, is a multi-lingual chorus of voices. Its cadences are today heard not only within the country but also far away from their habitual domains, transcending political, historical and societal boundaries. Indeed, literary writing by Indians at home and abroad, in English, in Hindi and many other Indian languages, can be regarded as the cutting edge of Indian culture today.

In 2002, Indian Council for Cultural Relations organized the country's first-ever International Festival of Indian Literature called 'At Home in the World', "with the primary objective of creating space for this entire spectrum of Indian writing in international literature. Another equally important objective was to reclaim the diaspora of Indian writers from across the globe." Some of the best known names in Indian and foreign literature were assembled in New Delhi to introspect and debate on every dimension of Indian literature. The idea was to seek answers to simple questions as to who is an "Indian" writer? What makes up a writer's identity? What are the notions of India in the minds of international and domestic audiences? What is the idea of "Home" to Indian diaspora abroad? Is English a foreign language in India? Is there anything called regional writing? Workshops and seminars were devoted to the analysis of themes important to authors, such as nostalgia and nationalism, myths and modes of story-telling, exoticisms and folklores, problems of interpretation, paradigms, gender, class, history, modernity, authenticity, colonialism, socialism and a writer's space in society, among a plethora of such other interesting themes.

Almost four years later, ICCR has released a book bearing the title of the seminar (*At Home in the World*), a comprehensive compilation of the proceedings of the Festival. The book is full of interesting and often profound observations made by various creative minds in different contexts. For instance, when speaker after speaker pontificated on the great antiquity of India, V.S. Naipaul commented: "I don't wish to disagree with anything that has been said by earlier speakers about antiquity, but this kind of modern writing requires a society that is developing, that is on the move to some extent. Ritualized societies, stagnant, societies.... they really don't need literature; they really don't need books. If I have to define a civilized man from the stagnant people who may have high technical skills and have high tools but in a way

have the need to define themselves, if I have to define the difference between the stagnant man and the man who is moving, it is this gift of self-awareness, this gift of self-assessment."

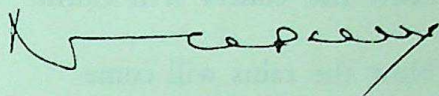
Then again, hear what Nirmal Verma has to say on the vexing question of the writer and his belief: "While writing, I completely forget my belief systems, my upbringing, my *sanskaras*.... It is a very strange sensation that as a writer I operate on a writing table in total opposition to certain things, certain values, certain circumstances, which have established what is called the fashionable term "identity". I lose my identity as a writer while I love all the ingredients and components, which constitute that identity—i.e. my country, my past, my tradition, my religion. Why does it happen? Why do these two contrary forces operate simultaneously in me?... After all, it was Ramakrishna who once very beautifully said that the rivers flow because they come out of something which remains *atal* (immovable). I think it is this interaction between the river and the mountains, something which remains essentially unchangeable in me, which I cannot define, which derives all sorts of influences from my past, from my memories, from my parents, from my memories, from my family, from my country, and this ever-flowing part of myself which brings my vocation as a writer into focus. Apparently, two contradictory things, but I think extremely essential for a writer."

When writers like Farrukh Dhondy, Anita Rau Badami and Pico Iyer were holding forth on the partly romantic question of exile, Khushwant Singh blasted out indignantly: "I would like to question the right of most people here calling themselves 'exile'. You are exiles by choice as you are exiles in luxury. I think I am the only genuine exile who had no choice but to be thrown out of Pakistan which is my home and a company which was entirely at that time of friends who were Muslims. I was torn from my own roots and made to come to India where I did not belong at that time. ... For people like me there was a real challenge.... I tried to rehabilitate myself here and develop a sense of belonging, which you have been decrying."

'In My Father's Tongue' was the heading given to a session where discussion centred round Indian English writing. When a lot of linguistic and academic jargons were being bandied about either in support of or against English, Allan Sealy went straight to the kitchen: "In a way the question that was, is English a foreign language? I found that to be a slightly insulting question because where does that leave me? It, in a way, disenfranchises me and I don't want to have to deal with that. It is a stupid question, it is like saying, is potato an Indian

vegetable, or the tomato? As far as I know, all these things have been here for roughly the same time as the English language has been here. Right? Three or four hundred years. But if you were to cross to the kitchen and talk to somebody there, there would be a pretty unanimous response that this is Indian. Why should there be this niggling doubt about the language and therefore about me when it comes to English?" A pertinent question, that.

Our readers may not easily come across this volume. Hence one felt like briefly introducing the book to them—a book which is extremely stimulating to say the least.



Nirmal Kanti Bhattacharjee
Editor

Anuradha Patil

Now the Rains Will Come

Now the rains will come
and the dust
on the leaves of grass
that grows unclaimed
at the road-side
and on the heads
of faceless men will be wiped away.

All the directions
and the momentary hopes
will be brightened.

I too perhaps will return
to poetry
where any village
under the blue sky
will be mine
and any path
will lead me
to the infinite stretch of horizon
where the closed fists
of winds will open
and while walking
on worn out scattered leaves
the entire surrounding
will be thrilled
along with me.

All the seasons
smeared with smells

of grass and earth
will casually touch
my life
that's running on the no-return path
and my existence of shading leaves
will ask for
at least a birth of new possibilities.

Then
by the heat of the conflagration
burning somewhere
even the sky here will go red
and the black tiger
who spread out amongst the stars
will awaken slowly once again
and the speechless darkness
of divine gloom
will spread around.

Translated from Marathi by Santosh Bhoomkar

Though it is Said

Though
it is said
not even a leaf of a tree stirs
without His will,
still the world is yours.

Yours are these
roots of sorrow
that retain the moisture
under the earth
Yours is the poem
growing
only in you
at the bottom of your mind.

Yours are these
lonely days

Anuradha Patil / 9

getting enmeshed
in the thread of detachment,
Yours are these
spreading torments
like a dark night
outside you.

Yours is even now
some hurting relationship
in its last faint throbs.
Yours is
the strange pictorial script
of unintentional affection
blooming on unfamiliar lips.

Yours is
the lonely burning lamp
in the dark corner
of a crumbling house,
yours is
the mind,
with stretched out hands
arrested at the door,
claiming its own
even the desolate outside world.

Yours are
the men with faces of landless people
treading on unfamiliar roads
handing over tomorrow's life
to tomorrows.
This life
like land
cracked at every place
is ultimately yours,
though
even a leaf of a tree
is not going to stir
without His will.

Translated from Marathi by Santosh Bhoomkar

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I Know

I know
you have
no promise or solace at all
for me,
nor have you
the imprints of my days
that I left with you without a word.
But I will trust
on your being only,
and perhaps
find once again
the seeds of forgotten affection
like the sprightly golden dear
enchanted by jingling bells
thrilling between us
and in the immense vastness
outside.

Translated from Marathi by Santosh Bhoomkar

Holding Firmly

Holding firmly
a light thread
of natural affection
I have resisted
the tragic with in me
at an arm's length for years
and began
to be like a seed
seeking moisture in the dry soil.

Relying
on the strength
of your
casual well-wishing
uttered by mistake

Anuradha Patil / 11

I entered
a new endless forest
where the days are transformed
into
deserted paths
and the sky is lit
only by the twilight.

I wandered
on your
neutral gloomy shore.
You will come out
from the illusions of
the sky the sea the stars the wind
and return
and I will become a home for you
that is left
time and again
still, silent, lonely.

I have mutely accepted
the distance you kept,
for a home can be raised
by even
a stove made of three stones
at the roadside, in a dense forest,
at the riverside,
and
the deadly fear of yearning
cumulates
even at the bottom
of the heart of tramps.

Today
I deny your touch
to my relics
and handover everything
to your wish
but
let there be at least
a deep inner understanding

beyond any relationship
to accept

the other one
sincerely
and
after getting indifferent
scatter
a handful warmth
of mature friendship
on the path.

Translated from Marathi by Santosh Bhoomkar



Arlene Zide

An Exercise in Forgetting

This is an exercise in forgetting
giving up,
letting go of

There is no formal demand
no ceremony, no leave-taking
no lover, child, husband
is waved down the road

This is a hiding
a spiriting away
a hoped-for healing
leaving behind what nags at the edges

The clear air, pine-needle scent of breeze
mostly silence
washes away the gray city verges
the soot-smeared face of the past

Only
You wake surprised
from mid-night dreams
sweating in the cold
your mind
races

chasing the same memories
of the plains and dips and valleys
up steep mountain paths

on horseback, over
chasm-cracked roads
through coursing water

you swing langur-like through the branches
of tall pine trees
in the morning's silence
broken
only by soughing birdsong, the buzz
of flies.

Ujjain Station

What you notice
Can't not notice

—unlike the hungry bodies of the big city stations
—unlike the rail-thin backbones and scrawny fingers of the Delhi
coolies

—unlike the mangy dog peeing up against a station post
—unlike the tattered eyes of beggar children
is the din

—not of trains
—not of people, things, trucks, autos
—not of the chai-hawker or the egg-vendor

the shrieking, pecking, hectoring, shrilling
fluttering
cacophony of the mynahs in the rafters
struggling
to settle for the night
in the station's metal struts and beams—
their screaming, calling, shrieking, cooing
attempt at roosting
echoing
re-echoing
till no human
voice

can raise itself
above the din.

A horror movie—
all that is warm and natural
the beauty of the world
turned on itself

the human voice
drowned.

Ashwani Kumar

Nursery Report Card

On the scarred morning of 15 August 1947,
I am rudely
thrashed by the hysterical
nursery report card of my childhood years.
It sobs unglitteringly all day,
seeing no grades
but only crushed neem leaves
splattered all over its dingy pages.
Excuses escape me
like old roommates in the college dormitory.
I whisper into her ears
a strange desire...
"I want to become a priest exiled
from the holy shrine."
Laziness flutters like a roving bird in my room.
Ambition slithers like a python in my flowerpot.
And luck evades me once again....
Unconvinced of my chastity
drunk in schizophrenia,
she awkwardly sits cross-legged
revealing nothing
except glistening virgin sand dunes.
Like unfaithful lawyers,
monsoon suddenly returns to my beloved city....
And the streets weep like forlorn prostitutes.
I hate not health but hygiene...
I hate not justice but empty injustice...
I hate not the dead but the living...
Mumbles the ticket collector at the railway station!!!

The Grandpa

When the summer sprouted,
 The earth gave birth to roasted wheat seeds.
 Leaping in the sorrow, the sleepy border village once told me a story;
 In spite of great famine, the goose and cat were friends...
 One impatient morning
 They decided to go to village market....
 To buy balloons for their birthday celebrations...
 Three grumpy high-ranking crows
 Pretending to guard the village from enemies
 Planted a trap for them...
 But Grandpa knew all the old tricks...
 He hid the goose and cat in his magic hat
 and smuggled them out of the country
 When the monsoons sang in chorus
 The village pond giggled with fresh fishes...
 In surprise, Grandpa invited everyone to the party
 except the crocodiles and monkeys...
 The goats welcomed the guests...
 The frogs danced on the floor...
 The honeybees served the beer...
 The leopard came happily as an uninvited guest
 And ate three fat water melons....haahhaaaaaa

Alzheimer

Cockroaches dressed in all-black ensemble,
 mockingbirds feigning royal parentage,
 assemble in late night ceremonies to condole the death
 of the only Banyan tree in the city.

Starlets of yesteryears forget to wear push up bras,
 on their anniversary parties...
 Hungry bureaucrats, thirsty politicians and struggling poets
 Come as surprise lovers on the smoke-filled dance floors.

Sizzling glamorously, semi-nude Pizza slices,
 casually X-ray the sperms of overgrown ambition...

...We all know...

Prejudice grows handsomely like fungus on the skeleton of pride.
Opulence sulks in her belly button like missed phone calls.
Scrap-books from school days change colours like
lizards frolicking over asbestos roofs.
Neighbours dry winter clothes over remains of Ravana idols.
And roaming fakirs surreptitiously nap at busy crossroads.

He remembers no toothbrush, no shaving cream, and no hair gel...
He remembers no sons, no daughters and no siblings...
Only his first job in the wounded forests.
Only his first bribe from a poor widow.
Only his first entry in the confidential report.
Only his first car drive on icy Tulsa turnpike.

Alzheimer comes sheepishly like extra-martial affairs,
offering instant promise to rejuvenate rotten arteries of lost love...
Bereaving the death of my old school headmaster,
I fail to remember
Why the local cemetery remains closed on Sundays...

Waking Early in Ayodhya

Waking early in Ayodhya
I recall my late night dream.
Highlighter pink cheeks, pine lips, mascara eyes,
long lonely collar bones
Honey suckle breasts, queen size lotus buttocks.
I remember only broken parts, not the whole body....
I also slowly remember
Dirty brown chocolate face banished king
vents his dormant desires
Seduces the wife of deserted saint for one-night stand
In the kitchen of his divine consort....
He spreads his Teflon-coated legs
Bends his artificial arrow...
She quivers, moans in ecstasy
They mate all day shamelessly
And the bricks of the mosque fall...
screaming with each fatal stroke,

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Indra drowns in more grumpy slumber,
 And the wrinkle free blood swallows all illegalities in the new
 republic...
 The jealous saints fret not any longer over illicit romance
 The pimps lament over the loss of love juices in the sacred hours
 I slowly learn from barren northern winds
 Historians have discovered lately
 From sixth century BC to unknown AD
 The banished king and his casual lover
 Have never made love in early December...

Love at Red Light in Delhi

One Holy river in slush flows intermittently.
 Two Basil leaves lye spiritless on the scattered corpses
 robbed by wanton autumn delight.
 Three priests play holi on the spy camera.
 Besotted with the nonsense science, endowed with senseless arts,
 bulletproof polygamous soldiers arrive in a raid on hiding
 mongooses...
 Hoarding imported roses under the encroached shades of lampposts
 Flower-sellers haggle in crooked humility...
 Oozing with tons of oomph, teachers confess poor job satisfaction
 on the childrens' day...
 Yawning cheerfully in the flattery of desperate eyes of lewd onlookers
 Siberian storks begin another day...
 Believe it or not, people say
 Renunciation lives happily in the missing genitals of civilization...
 Calorie too low, enthusiasm all time high
 Girls in the capital make love in platform shoes at the red light...
 They make love in deserted shopping malls...
 They make love on sky-high expressways...
 They make love in shy underground metros...
 They make love on the virile spines of racing bikes...
 They make love everywhere except in the mildew homes.
 Believe it or not, people say
 Love is permanently domiciled in strange cavities of desire...

Asoke Deb

Art

A Sculptor moves closer to his stone,
The stone denudes its form
The night rolls down its depth.
With sounds of chisel, the hammer and of breath
The night engulfs:
At the daybreak, come out of the room two sculptures

Translated from Bengali by Subhasis Talapatra

Poem

He is mine
A relation from side of death,
My death.
With dawn, because of this,
I suffer breathing trauma
My breathing trauma
In the dawn, because of this
I turn to a corpse.
I carry it throughout the day
At night, in the pyre of earthly life
I lay
in my pyre.
He appears that time asking the well-being
His well-being

Translated from Bengali by Subhasis Talapatra

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Homilies on home

What pains a fridge most, in fact its own wintry coldness
On opening the door, it presents its own winter frozen
blood as light
Through out the dead of night it smuggles
a sort of chilly weeping in our family

Translated from Bengali by Ashesh Gupta

Bishnupada Ray

Life

Beware of the sniffer dog
she can sniff you out
like the scent of marigolds.
That street magician will vanish
in the thin air again
leaving no trace of the body
except the stealth heat
caught on the radar.
Lusting for the bitch?
After the spasms
no more starry-eyed wonder
the vigilantes will come tonight
no personal vendetta is meant
after the violent act
where should the responsibility begin?
The momentary glory is like magic
when the magic ends, nemesis begins.

Terracotta Space

The space holds the key
the silence of the spotted darkness
the harmony of the stars
connects humanity beneath.

Excavations may find there someday
some ruins of thousand years
or some dog-chew meanness

buried and fossilized
the ancient terracotta art.

Or some coins of greatness
with helplessness of the other
on the other side invisible.

Or some black holes
of invisible justice
mummified great kings
like one kept in the museum.

Or will it throw up
some unforeseen relics
of the terracotta spaceage?

Jurassic World

The bird's eye view of the landscape
gives a picture of the Jurassic age
The crystal clear water-world is flanked
by the forest greenlands
The whole landscape is dotted
with skyscraper ghettos
and massive pylon and cable network
With carplanes crisscrossing the skyscape
It is a different world altogether
for here live the dinosaurs
But nothing will last forever.

Unlikely Rain

I have seen better days
when I could sleep untroubled in my bed
when my mind was free
from all disturbing thoughts
now wandering as a compulsive vagrant
I discover parallel worlds
the unknown sky of unknown towns

the fading glow of the skyline
the water dividing beneath the bridge
the colonies of parthenium
encroaching the unclaimed lands
the deciduous trees in winter mode
the elongated days and nights
all create an unlikely rain
of simulated existence
my eyes catch fire in the rain.

Sunset

It is a pleasure to watch a sunset
to go to the riverside and see the Sun
go down over the horizon into the forest
It is a most awesome sight.

It is a pleasure to watch a sunset
bathing in the river the Mother wears
the vermilion Sun on her forehead
then drawing her saree over her head
kneels before the alter of Tulsi
to perform the day's last rite
it is a most sacred sight.

It is a pleasure to watch a sunset
the humility of the setting Sun
soothes the mind till it rises to shine
Over a tough and clever world
The soft heart of the world
now throbs with infinite softness
It is a most beautiful sight.

Self-portrait

I warn the photographer
not to take my photograph
I fly away from the camera
that makes a duplicate of me.

I do not look at the mirrors
I go to the zoo
there's a tiger, that's me!
There's a baboon, that's me!
There's a snake, that's me!
At the entrance of the restaurant
'Use me' pots mimic animals,
they mimic me.

I like to break everything
I like to see everybody insulted
and humiliated
I like to destroy the world
to preserve myself.

The glossy beauty-parlours do not welcome me
I go to an obscure local saloon
my claws and tail and fang well hidden
the incessant crackling scissors
try to trim me
they do not redeem me.

The Thin Line

The thin line of detachment often breaks
kicking the nonchalant hard
at the line of actual control.

Buffeted with blows of enemies
Bathed in the fire of hell
The thin line of sanity shifts always
In a zigzag snake-movement.

The thin line of good humour disappears
amidst the bubbles of doubt and diffidence
turning the rebel into a clown.

C.S. Shah

A Proper Perspective

I've stopped visiting the seashore,
once my joy;
not that I've grown old
but because
I can no more tolerate
the compulsive
to and fro of the waves;
the tiredness
that does not culminate in death
nor offers any respite—has no end.

And of late I've
accepted the concept of death.

The Naughty Sparrow

The house sparrow delicately
adjusted her pointed shoes
on the frame of the mirror
and dotted her image inside
tut, tut; tut, tut...

Our son — just past infancy —
turned his ears towards the sound,
eyes, neck, and head rotated with effort.
The sparrow played with the child, and
the child acknowledged the friendship.

Till that day—
before the son was born, to be precise—
I used to admire the sparrow
for her benign foolishness—
naïve, I would call her.

The question now daunts me:
Last year, year before last year, for whom
did the sparrow dot the mirror?

And my wife laughs
at the wrinkles over my forehead:
You are too intelligent dear
to understand the obvious—
before our child was born
you were the child for the sparrow!

Top and Bottom

The swan moves with
a majestic gait,
but then should no one
try to walk?

The sun shines forth
scorching,
but then should no one
light a candle?

The moon heals with
a tender touch,
but then should no one
offer to sympathize?

The stars twinkle with
celestial beauty,
but then should no one
apply the face lift?

The saint speaks with
final authority,

but then should no one
start a debate?

A Place to Rest

I mistook your silence
as your weakness and
continued to shout and scoff at you
with words I now find obnoxious
even to think about.
I used them as a cutting blade
in arguments and debates,
in seminars and workshops,
only to prove you wrong.
I did not realize—
shouting doesn't make
music or song.
Exhausted, now
I seek a place to rest and
you silently open your arms.

The Effect

That day
as I was washing my face
I saw myself without a mask.

I had just returned
from the monk's cottage.
Had I seen myself then
in the mirror of his sermon?

For, of late, it was unusual
to find a clear face
without lines of worries
or blemishes of hate.

The hermit had said:
experience creates a mask
even though no one desires it.

Fe Seen Ejaz

A Button

The impact was unusual
When the button of my cuff fell off, untraceable
This led to a flood of memories.
A thread of light flashed through my mind
Like a taut string of a musical instrument.
You applied so many stitches
To bind my heart in your own special way.
The thread passed through your pink lips;
How swiftly your teeth severed that.
Melodies poured out of your wide open eyes

There is no one to put lips on the flute the way you did.
Who else can sew on a button like you?
There is only a breath-like needle
that mends my wounds now.

Translated from Urdu by Samir Mukherjee

Verse, A Lump of Ice

Don't offer me your silken palm
A passion may ignite my lips
Slowly creeping into my breath
It might descend on your rose-petaled palm
My sight may get lost in the lines of your hand.

When a sailor discovers
A milky white, grey, violet or pink island
That suddenly appears on the palm of a sea
He feels proud
and an impressive song emerges from him.

Who knows what will happen
If my intense desire
Lifts the dust of haze
Enabling me to kiss that island.

You may pull your hand away from mine anytime
In your own unique style
Darling! Fit be merely left with silken knots in my hand;
Verse is like a lump of ice
That can burn the toughest of palms.

Translated from Urdu by Samir Mukherjee

Pickpocket and the Moon

Inside the shrunken curve
Of the soft sky
On the shoulder of a velvet-cloud
Carelessness makes the purse open out
..... just a little
A shining halo becomes visible
A pickpocket's hand stretches as far as the halo:
The moon resembles a yellow coin.
Evading human eyes
He grabs it tightly in his fist
It could be a rare treasure for a pauper

A sleepless dweller from a habitat sunk in sleep
Will be only too happy
If he is able to get the moon.

Translated from Urdu by Samir Mukherjee

I'm Reading Your Lips

I read your lips
 A book, half opened and a rose
 Kept on my chest
 I can't say whether I am asleep or awake—
 I just read your lips.
 A story takes shape in each crease of your lips
 As if a line of verse
 Is imprinted below the arch
 Tell me, who has written these
 Naughty stories and poems.
 Was it me?
 This new found silence of your lips
 Is merciless
 It's too difficult for me to understand.
 The writing that appears on your lips
 Is certainly not mine.
 The message that my lips had written
 Was honest and subtle.
 I had imparted my tone to your lips
 But today I find a different text written
 Every word of which appears strange
 And grey.
 Now the boat of my heart may be afloat
 Only if a smile
 Shaped like a bow
 Stretches across your lips.

Allow me to discover a new tale
 Salvaged from the old tales
 Let's start on a voyage again :
 Let my thirst help the sail to billow.
 The sea is calling you.
 I'll collect any and every word
 Which falls from your lips.
 I wish to travel with your lips
 I only await a signal from your lips
 That is why I go on reading your lips.

Translated from Urdu by Samir Mukherjee

Sometimes, Perhaps

Your performance is worthy of admiration
Everyone feels happy and satisfied
With the smile that hovers over your lips
But I'm well aware
That there is dampness and moisture
Underneath the foundation of your home
And the chests of your walls are burning
The eyes' ventilators are open
Dimmed with smoke.
I offer a handkerchief to you
Dipped in fragrant memories of yesteryears
Put it in your purse
Because unexpectedly
A bleak and melancholic evening
May remove you
From an assembly pulsing with mischievous laughter
To a grim and silent corner where you shed tears.
If someone looks at you then
Surely you'll like to keep the kohl in your eyes intact
While you wipe your wet eyelashes.

Sometimes tears come within the range of laughter.

Translated from Urdu by Samir Mukherjee



Jeevakant

Matter of Happiness

In the night I fall asleep
So, a matter of how much of happiness
Today Sky looks very clear
So lucky!

All around the kids are
Using Pistil instead of pen
Practicing of taking an aim on the running dog.

All around, the kids are
Searching for water for washing their hands
Then, in this situation
Friend! I spent my last night taking a sleep
So, a matter of how much of happiness!

Translated from Maithili by Pranav Bihari

The Town is Burning

The town is burning
And we are in some corner
Celebrating the festival with joy
Perhaps to forget the flame
Dance is good.

The town is burning
And we are in order to throw down each other

And listening defeat from him
Exhausted enough.

The town is burning
And we are on the frontage of our home
Keeping our own child in lap
Leaping him with tiredness
Kissing the leap
Perhaps neglecting the flame of fire.

Translated from Maithili by Pranav Bihari

The Bird Searches

In the last stroke of night
Bird arises
Throng together on the highway.

The body of small animals
Get broken under the vehicle
In small groups
Bird tries to find something for feasting

In the countryard on the bamboo
The bird is sitting
Itching his feather with beak
Bird searches eatables
The tiled roof both the ways
At the shore of the lake on the cotton tree
The sitted bird sings the song
Bird singing the song
Looks towards the water
Towards the lake's water
That everything is flowing in water
The bird searches for feasting.

Translated from Maithili by Pranav Bihari

Birds are Mum

In the evening all the birds return
Returning towards the nest
All the birds make a queue
Sing song of happiness.

Now these birds are mum
Flying in queue these birds
Returning to home in the evening sky
All the birds are keeping mum.

The number of birds decreases
Books increases on the earth
Increases the poem
Increases the newspaper
Decreases the birds in the sky
Decreases the song of the birds
In the first evening.

Translated from Maitbili by Pranav Bihari

M.K. Ajay

Drift Song

The wind that caught me
by surprise at the leaf's brightest hour
when crows rummaged the sky for scent of monsoons
is a name freed from its body—
a spirit presiding over this wetness.
Frailties, remembered again
as I stepped into the wind's ghostly flight
have become sprouts of *garba* grass
and white madness on jasmine plants.
This is the pedestal from which
we survey our world of broken memories,
and aromas that bind me to my grandparents.
And the raindrops—how they slide through red tiles
to the waiting floor below, creating puddles
of bewilderment, teasing coldness.
This time I caught the wind by surprise
waiting for it at this afternoon's only spot
of warmth near the well, beside the drumstick tree.
This, when at the leaf's brightest hour
a chrysalis conquered its apprehensions
as crows rummaged the sky for monsoons.

Dead Leaves

Double bind of my soul
warped in time's distending shadows;
dead leaves dressing the earth
hide a remote warmth calling

through visceral aches, across ancient fields.

I slow down these mysteries
surrounding me this day,
bits and pieces of wonder stuck here
in these crevices, these woods,
these last outposts of where I belong.
A dragon fly's skeleton floats
a silent fossil inspecting the pond's stillness
this reservoir of weeds
and magical fables narrating green.
I slow myself down
letting the oriole cry into my voice
letting crickets explain
unsaid compromises, suggestions of the past.
Dead leaves don't rustle here anymore
no one keeps a chronicle of events
and sudden unfolding of sunlight's surprises.
When light came
they found me become one with those leaves.

Washing Away This Day, Stillness

This day builds castles in clouds
beside a lone pigeon's rain-touched flutter.
Those hillocks aside, nothing tells us
that rains have introduced
a moss of slimy deceit into our lives.
My mind has split into a hundred sights—
each sight within a finger of green—
splashing on puddles of sadness
blanketing mud-roads.
In it, leaves mark decay of trees
and an insect's last watery sojourn.
You feel your bones in this calm
the ferrous, aseptic flow of blood,
the brain's hunger for air and poise
and recall, for all that we want to hoard
into our biographies.
You feel your bones drowning
till sunlight tearing clouds

blinded our sights
used to this soggianness, this stillness.
We wait for rains
to wash away this day.

When I Woke up

I woke up late
saw crows frozen in white clouds
cunning black etched in white
saw winds laughing like *Asuras*
through spangled hills.
In my reverie, I must have bragged
about my youth, for the wind echoes:
"everyone is younger than a poet
with his countless dreams
tearing away from ancient sleep
lurking inside, behind arthritic joints
now painfully murmuring."

I woke up late
and became a few grey hair
walking on my flesh,
rudiments of truth
on my torso's scalp.

Tracing This City's Mythology

I discern a mythology
far away from where *Brahminy* kites
glide into our lives,
their flights, a detour
into arecanut trees by my bedroom window.
Look at this city's faded motifs.
A bird's eye-view is needed
to feel its pain etched into bylanes
arteries of steel, glassy facades,
smells, failings tugging like anchors.
I wish something here would talk to us
that these green patches hidden among people,

would sense our awkwardness,

sense our sleepwalker's body language.

The morning newspaper does nothing to help

merely recoding another day gone

into this misshapen earth's chanting of oblivion

far away from the *Brahminy* kites.

Another day has just walked into shadows.

Paresh Narendra Kamat

Deep Runs the Well

Deep, deep down
sounds echo
at the well's bottom;
the spring sobs
clinging to the darkness
of the flooded waters.

The water rises
drop by drop
all day and all night;
there is water in the well,
water in the pots,
and water in the eye....

Water is profound
water is mysterious
cannot fathom the water's depth;
dark and rocky,
there's no hint
of the bottom of the well

Water is restless
water is uneasy
it frays: it pines;
water slithers
over the edge of the obvious,
the unexpressed.

There is water in the darkness,
darkness in the water

at the suffocating bottom of the well;
take care, my dear,
at your mind's edge;
deep runs the well.

Translated from Konkani by Sacheen Pai Raikar

A Fertile Creation...

You come
and twist my body
inside out.
You embrace my sole yearning
raising my expectations.
This yearning:
is not barren,
nor fallow,
it is not shallow.

It is profound
A fertile creation.

Always green, and fresh.
Like the mud, wet in the rain.
Like the overflowing waters of the river.
Like the dancing fields in the wind,
their shimmering rhythm.

You come,
and you grow in my heart;
like Radha on Lord Krishna's peacock-blue body.

I watch you
I feel you
I caress you—your body within mine;
in the ardour of a silken vision.

I spring your touch
out of my every pore

I drown my eyes
in your blue eyes

I mix my breath
with your stormy breath

You are intoxicating
You take over my entire body

There's music of creativity
playing in my blood

The bright sky in my eyes
And the earth blooms in my embrace

You become
the Lord's voice

You create
a meaningful existence

You continue twisting me, tightly,
every moment

As I embrace you,
I release myself from my mind's clasp...

Translated from Konkani by Sacheen Pai Raikar

Whimpering

The silent, white, gloomy monsoon village light;
the whimpering boring dusk.

The unending monotonous rain
does not allow

the mind to do anything.

Does not encourage staring...

If that is true
yet, the wet nightfall drags,
swallows up the surroundings
little by little,
right in front of my eyes.
And I have sat for long,
at the window
with a downward gaze;
look outside
against my will
and I see:
the darkness has slowly, slowly
dragged the last hope of light
sinking
into its dark swamp,
to the raucous chorus of the crickets,
freshly awake...

Translated from Konkani by Sacheen Pai Raikar

Storm: Two Poems

1

Storm: a poem on death,
written with words of death,
to experience death on dying.

2

Comes the storm—
serving notice of its arrival
beating drums,
lighting torches,
creating a crazed, possessed disaster
usually like the unexpected rain.

The storm's coming...
Hey...the storm's coming...

Even though the warning is shouted out
till voices go hoarse
how could you sit, with crossed legs, and gossip?

The storm goes wilder—
the sea rejoices
the waves dance
the wind shouts with joy,
upturning canoes
the water is aroused to a flood

The storm grows giddy—
playing with a slurry of blood;
wiping the bright red kum-kum off
the forehead of the freshly married bride;
it pushes the rest of her life
into a cemetery-like silence
And having closed the gates of our huts,
our unmoving bodies lying like the dead
the lifelessness oozing out our bodies
Like the hired bullocks that run, screaming,
till their mouths froth with blood...

They have turned to a storm
They have turned to a storm...

Translated from Konkani by Sacheen Pai Raikar

House: A Thought

No one may face homelessness, losing their homes
Like the heart that beats in every body
everyone should have a home.
A family should occupy every home
like a four-seater car.
A house should not be like a public bus, jam-packed.

A house should bloom like the jasmine, fresh; impulsive...
And the family in the house

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should spread its fragrance all around
like starlight.

I feel too...
that I should also have a house,
small but kindhearted
just for myself.
Like a mother's womb
like the tears in the eyes
and like the wetness of the soil;
clean, spotless, un-blemished, innocent
a happy facade, transparent like glass...

A home ought to be:
like the thick cream on milk.
A home ought to have:
an eternal well-being flowing silently
from the edge of weariness, till nightfall.

A profound sky-high reflection
should evolve in the house
The huge earth's depth
should sparkle through a house.
A shower of light
should play in the house.
The home should laugh
like the innocent sweetness of a child...

No family in any house may suffer from suffocation.
No house may ever turn into a cattle shed.
No one, in despair, should ever get frustrated with the house.
No one in the family may ever get angry at each other.
No house may ever seem stupid, foolish, shallow...
Nobody from the house may lose their vigour, purity
and turn into an eunuch.
No one may ever sob and cry, never be sad.
—No house may ever become a thirty-two-and-a-half heads' worth,
rotten, musty, stinking and wretched mansion...

Translated from Konkani by Sacheen Pai Raikar

Sailabala Mahapatra

Painting

Who can tell me
when shall fall a branch of tree
shedding all the leaves
when shall the bird return
now the sky is filled
with melodious voices

Who can tell me
when shall the earth's heart sink
in sorrowful revelations!

Translated from Oriya by Manas Ranjan Mahapatra

Circle

It's the moment to unfold

Now the moment to unfold
from suffocation
from sky, from jungle

I turn an aimless ship
in which loneliness, I do not know
and then dear eternity!
your smile turns me into a
green harbour

I, a devided being of sad feelings
search the path of liberty in you

Yahshodhara!

should I be in each birth and rebirth
remain so helpless a being in decadence
and full with sorrow should I forever
unfold to your jungle-cave
and again expand to the earth
in the *omkar* of creation.

Translated from Oriya by Manas Ranjan Mahapatra

A Report of the Starvation Commissioner

Hrusikesh Panda

Deer live in the forests; they live off grass from the forest and water from the wild springs. They owe nothing to man, they do not harm man, yet man hunts them down. Who can satisfy the greed of man?

[Sanskrit gnome]

(i)

On the 2nd of December 2000 some Bhubaneswar-based newspapers flashed a front-page headline in large fonts. The caption was: "Government's Gift to People of the State in New Millennium: Tribal Young Woman Dies of Starvation." Different newspapers had published the news under slightly different headings. The summary of the news was: a woman named Premashila Bhoi of the village of Gamada had died on the 1st of December 2000 after going through a month-long starvation. Despite Premashila's battle with hunger for one month, no one offered her a handful of rice or even broken rice. The news of her death also did not reach the government. The corpse was cremated in great haste without any post mortem, because an autopsy would have established that Premashila had died of starvation.

The Honorable Legal Council, in its meeting held on 2nd December, suspended all other activities and demanded a probe into this. Following discussions, it was resolved that the Commissioner-in-charge of Starvation would be vested with an impartial enquiry into the matter, and would submit his report after investigation. The Starvation Commissioner would be given three months for this.

According to the instructions received, I am turning in the

following report. I am turning in the report on this day, the 17th of January 2001, within only a month and a half and before the three-month limit.

I had conducted the investigation between January 11 and January 14, 2001. Notification for this inquiry had been issued in advance. On the 11th of January, about one hundred old men and old women from around ten to fifteen neighbouring villages had been brought to Gamada. The report will indicate who could have brought them there. Besides, many a political leader had also paid their visits. This had created little difficulties in the gathering of testimonies from the witnesses.

I had fixed January 14 for public hearing at the district headquarters and a notice to this effect had been circulated widely. Not one witness, however, had turned up on that day.

(ii)

Before I give an account of Premashila's ordeal with starvation, I shall have to recount the stories of a few men, apparently not involved with the incident, but in truth involved with it intimately. For this, one has to go back in time by about forty years.

There used to be a station named Gamada Road along the railroad connecting Titilagarh and Raipur. Now a days Gamada Road is a big township and a big hub of business. It houses a Municipality and a Tehsil office.

Around the year 1960, Gamada Road was only a small railway station. There was a small teashop in that station, belonging to Gopala Bagarti, the carter. Only one passenger train happened to halt at the station during the day. No express or freight train used to stop there. About seventeen kilometers away from the station was a village—Gamada. 'Gamada' means a small hillock. Since the village was situated atop a hillock, it was named Gamada. Back then thick interminable jungle used to fill up the region. The jungle was full of century-old timber species like *sal*, *piasal*, *asan*, tendu, rosewood and *karanj*. Tigers prowled in the habitations at night. Cases of one or two men falling prey to a man-eater tiger each year has been mentioned in government records. If any shopkeeper or passenger reached Gamada Road at night, they used to lie down to rest on the only bench in the station. Bagarti fixed them a humble dinner of rice and dal.

Gobinda Bhulia was a weaver by caste. His parents and his

brothers and sisters knew weaving. They wove clothes on handlooms. Gobinda Bhulia vended these hand woven clothes to passengers in the running train. When he made a little money, he too built a house of wattle-and-daub walls with roof of small half-cylindrical shingles of baked clay. He built it outside Gamada Road railroad station across the shop of Bagarti and started his clothes shop. The sale was not much; so he added to his store provisions like dal, rice, salt, oil and occasionally a stack of bunches of plantains or a ripe pumpkin. By 1960 Gamada Road had two permanent residents: Gopala Bagarti and Gobinda Bhulia. Around the same time two other families arrived at Gamada Road. The first family was of Jalandhar Singh.

Peshawar Singh, father of Jalandhar Singh, was a driver of a forest contractor in the central Indian district of Raipur. He used to smuggle wood for the contractor. Occasionally, he would filch and sell the smuggled timber himself. He had been able to buy a truck with this stealth money. One day he was caught in the act of smuggling wood in the Chhatisgarh region. In earlier years, other contractors would have come to his help. But Peshawar Singh was a truck-owner now, and the contractors did not bail him out. So Peshawar Singh went to jail.

He spent six years in jail. During these six years, his wife gave birth to two sons and a daughter. The girl child died before she could complete six months. Some say that the mother strangled her own child to death, as she could not have reared a girl child in her unaccommodated condition.

On his release from the jail, Peshawar went home and asked his wife and son to pack their personal effects. While they packed, Peshawar went out and hauled in a stolen truck, and loaded the luggage into the truck. He was in a great rush. As he said "Hurry up, hurry up" the stuff was loaded, and he entered the cabin of the truck with his wife and three sons. Peshawar was so rushed and terrified that he had no time to think about his wife and sons. Let alone, be troubled about the new children.

Peshawar arrived at Gamada Road. He left his wife and the youngest son Raipur at Bagarti's shop, and sped away in his truck with Jalandhar and Sachinder, the other two sons. Peshawar changed the license plate and the chassis number of the truck and returned in the night. When he arrived, his wife had taken over Bagarti's shop, that is, she was cooking. Two days into their stay, Peshawar assessed Bagarti's business and bought the shop for one hundred rupees. Bagarti had been keeping shop for years. But he had never seen this sum of ready cash.

Peshawar comforted Bagarti: "This is not all; I'll make you the manager of my depot. You will mind my timber depot and will make more money."

"I know nothing of timber business," Bagarti replied with his coarse naiveté. "Besides, if timber business is so profitable, why did you buy my little shop?"

Peshawar told him that Bagarti would not understand this. Bagarti should limit himself to the jobs within his comprehension. That is, Bagarti should locate old and sturdy timber species. He should arrange labourers. Peshawar would get the permit from forest department for removal of timber and its sale.

(iii)

Within a year of the aforementioned episode another family made its way into Gamada Road. The family of Jahangir. Jahangir was a petty thief operating at Raipur railway station and in the passenger and freight trains passing through Raipur railway station. He had started his career, as a child, in larceny by stealing slippers and shoes and bags and suitcases from the railroad passengers. By the time he was twenty, he was able to break into wagons of goods trains and had become the ringleader of a big band of robbers. Once, during an act of robbery, he had killed an unarmed railway guard first by stabbing him and then by shooting at him from his country-made gun.

After the murder, he filched a liquor vendor's jeep parked in the Prostitutes' Lane and picked up his pet whore who was all of sixteen years of age and arrived at the same Gamada Road station. He came to Peshawar's shop and lived there. Peshawar gave him leave to stay there for as long as he liked in exchange of liquor. Besides, the whore who had been introduced as the wife of Jahangir, became an obsession for both Peshawar and his son Jalandhar. Peshawar's wife realized that it was not possible for the two families to stay under one roof; so she had a talk with Gobinda Bhulia. Two hundred rupees and a little intimidation clinched the deal and Gobinda sold his shop to Jahangir. Gobinda returned to his old ways of selling his hand-woven clothes in the village markets and to passengers in local trains.

Jahangir sold in his shop country liquor, besides rice and dal, and became a partner of Peshawar in the timber trade. With the money earned, the two were able to take illegal possession of the unused land belonging to the railway department. On those estates they started

erecting log godowns, sawmills and houses to be let out to their workers.

One day Peshawar had gone off with his truck of smuggled timber as usual and never came back. No trace of him could be found nor of his stolen truck. Peshawar's family concluded that Jahangir had a hand in his disappearance and the two families fell foul of each other. So, Jahangir set up his own independent timber smuggling trade. He begot children and they too were engaged in this business right from their young days.

The businesses of the two families were running parallel to each other. The chief occupation during the years 1965-70 was felling of trees and selling of timber. Ten workers hired at the rate of ten rupees per head were able to haul into the depot logs worth two hundred rupees. When these logs were sawed at the sawmills, the price went up to five hundred rupees. But at times the workers who had taken an advance payment of ten rupees were unable to supply the contracted quantity of wood. So they were bound to pay an interest at the rate of ten rupees per month for every one hundred rupees borrowed.

Meanwhile, bootlegging was going on in every depot. This trade too was run by these two families. Earlier, the villagers had brewed their own homemade liquor from rice. Now these two families of Jahangir and Jalandhar greased the palms of the excise department officials and made them raid and harass the villagers. Several villagers were arrested. This boosted the liquor trade of the two families. The excise department officials were applauded and appreciated for controlling trade in illicit liquor. Country-made liquor meant a concoction by adding water and colour to rectified spirit.

The workers could not repay the advance money they were taking when they had to buy liquor from the two timber traders. But they never believed that they were being cheated. The hard currency appeared larger than life to them. A sack of black gram, that fetched them three rupees, used to take four months to be cultivated and harvested. A night of felling trees fetched eight *annas*. In fifteen days the work fetched three rupees. Again one did not have to fell trees every day; one could fell trees for six days in a fortnight.

Despite all this, there had been no record of any starvation death in Gamada until 1980. There is no evidence of any starvation death until then in the testimonies submitted before me. It seems to be the case that tree felling began with all fury just about the time. It is also to be noted that the area received lower rainfall from that time.

Another development during that time is also worth mentioning.

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Gamada Road was growing into a township and a municipality was set up there. Jalandhar and Jahangir had established themselves over the years as two distinguished political rivals of this region, and there had been no third human there to challenge them. If one got elected to the Legal Council, the other became the chairman of the municipality. If one belonged to one political party, the other belonged to the rival political party. Even now they belong to different political parties and have apportioned the political space between them. I know only too well that this recount of their history will incense them. That this report will be much criticized, I have no doubt.

(iv)

The village of Gamada consisted of two localities: Gamada and Sanagamada or little Gamada. Gamada was situated on an upland inhabited by thirty families of *kandh* tribe. They belonged to the *budka* clan. Sanagamada had twenty to twenty five houses of milkmen, weavers, oilmen, farmers of *kultha* caste and brahmins. The local panchayat of Gamada village held office at Sanagamada.

Premashila's father was a *bagna*, a minstrel of sacred songs. He travelled on foot from village to village with *brahmaveena* — the sacred harp — in hand and the deity crafted by him from paddy seeds in his bag, and sang. He sang about *Bhimasidi*, the genealogy of the *kandhs* and tales from the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*. In the past, the local landlords and chieftains took care of his board, lodging, gifts and payments. After the abolition of landlordism, he became poor. That was when the community's matchmaker *dbangara majhi* came over with a marriage proposal with one Purna. Premashila did not have a brother. The songs and religious canons were sacred to the *bagna* profession, and a father passed on these skills and secrets to his son; they were forbidden to a daughter. Premashila's father was unhappy about not having a son, and now had fallen on hard times with the abolition of landlordism. Premashila was a lithesome beauty, and she was very hard working. While her father wandered with his sacred minstrelsy, her mother and she looked after their land and collected minor forest produce.

After the forest had been denuded by the loggers, Premashila and her mother cleared around two acres of forestland. These two women developed this forestland first as low yielding upland, then medium land, and finally fertile land suitable for paddy. Had her father stretched his legs a little longer, feigned a little more reluctance, Premashila could

have married someone better off. But then the father had neither the time nor the zeal for stretching this search for a groom. All the rituals: *mandatarapa* – bride-selection, *haraja* – bride price-haggling, receiving of paddy, eating of pancakes, tying of knot, face rinsing, *gansan* – meeting of kins, *mangala* – consecration of the bride, betrothal, *gorotola*, *mubujua* – seeing the bride, *gharasama*, *dalbobola*, *modojbaren* were celebrated in due course.

Modojbaren means the ceremonial unveiling of the marriage pandal and the ritual feast of rice and chicken curry.

By then Purna was up to his ears in debt. He started to fell trees for the subcontractors of Jahangir and Jalandhar to repay his debt. But the wage was not enough. So he borrowed a thousand rupees from Bagarti, the subcontractor, in the first rains after Premashila's homecoming. The interest on the loan of one thousand rupees was one hundred rupees per month. Purna was left with three hundred rupees after repaying his debt. He bought some rice, salt and edible oil. He explained to Premashila that he would now be an indentured labour in order to repay his debt of a thousand rupees. Without wages.

Premashila failed to understand what this debt was all about. Her father had never incurred any debt. Among her father's minstrel songs was one, which narrated how a strong and powerful man like Bhima had been reduced to an indentured labourer to a rickety person like Kubera.

Premashila narrated this episode to Purna, and called upon him that he must make an effort and repay the debt; he need not worry about the household expenses.

Premashila returned to the forests once again. She returned to the weekly market. *Saal* leaves, *tendu* leaves, incense, honey, black berries, mangoes, mushrooms—whatever she could, she picked up and put on sale in the weekly market. She made both ends meet. On the days she collected nothing valuable, she carried two bundles of firewood to the local market.

Around September and October Premashila harvested and brought home the short-duration paddy she had sown on the barren denuded hilly land. By then she was in the eighth month of her pregnancy. Yet, she husked the paddy in the domestic paddy thresher, winnowed it, and stored the rice in her house. After that, she could not get up, meaning that she could no longer go to the forest. Nonetheless, she managed to cook everyday rice, or some minor millets like *gurji* or *janba*. One such day when she was cooking rice, her labour pains started. Premashila's mother was informed. She came promptly. The delivery

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was smooth. A boy was born. Thirty days after the birth there was the ritual cutting of his hair. The child was given an oil-and-turmeric massage and bathed. Raw rice was offered before the eight *Devis* and the tutelary deity, *Jadenbuda*. A cock was fetched. Premashila's father kept on reciting the names of their ancestors. As he uttered the name *Hrudananda*, the cock pecked at the rice. The child was named Hrudananda.

After the feasting, when Premashila's parents left, Purna with his son in one arm, and pretending to tend to the rice pot with the ladle with the other hand, revealed that he had been to Bagarti, the subcontractor. Purna had learnt that the loan of one thousand rupees he had borrowed from Bagarti, had soared to two thousand rupees, with compounded interest. His total wages for various kinds of bonded and free labour by now amounted to one thousand rupees only. That meant, a net additional loan of one thousand rupees. There was no conceivable way of repaying this loan. Therefore, he had made up his mind to migrate as an indentured labourer.

Premashila could not make much out of this computation. She only understood that her *Bhima* was now caught in a debt trap. She gathered an intense and spontaneous strength of immenseness, snatched her baby from Purna's arms, put the baby to suckle her breast, and went off to sleep.

(v)

Fifteen days after this Purna took a loan of two thousand rupees from Jalandhar. The rate of interest was the usual ten per cent per month. He repaid one thousand rupees to Bagarti. Jalandhar retained one hundred rupees towards government stamp duties. Purna executed documents that he would migrate to Andhra as an indentured labourer. Jalandhar retained another two hundred rupees towards transportation expenses. Purna purchased clothes for his journey, a travel bag and other accessories worth two hundred rupees. He bought a sack of rice. He gave Premashila two hundred rupees and kept the remaining one hundred rupees for himself.

The paddy from the medium land and the millet from the low yielding upland had been reaped and stacked. The paddy from the fertile low land was yet to be reaped. It was on one of these days that he set out in the trolley of a truck to Gamada Road railway station. Thousands of bonded labourers like him thronged the station. There.

a brother of Jalandhar introduced Purna to a broker from Andhra. The broker had in his group about a hundred others like Purna. The broker was unable to speak in Oriya. A man of *gond* tribe from a neighbouring village, ten kilometers away from Gamada, who had been to Andhra many times, mediated between the broker and the labourers.

Purna had never boarded a train before. Now inside the train, he fidgeted and was flustered. Six people crammed into each bench meant for three; and the rest were splayed on the floor. In the beginning he could read the names of the passing stations, but the next day he could not read these names, as he was acquainted with only Oriya letters. Afterwards, he was unable to read Telugu letters, and even Oriya letters as they had been scribed by people who did not know the Oriya script. He was afraid of going to the toilet in the train. But when it became urgent, he stood in the queue. When his turn came, he found the toilet absolutely filthy. He vomited there and to avoid going there again he stopped eating. He did not even drink water unless he felt utterly thirsty. The *bhulias*, *kandhs*, *gonds*, *pabarias*, *binjhais* and *paikas* and cowherds, who were travelling with him, ridiculed him for being a novice train rider.

The indentured labourers, who had been to Andhra before, discussed excitedly that Hyderabad was a big station. This discussion gathered momentum on the second day of their train ride, and Purna understood that they were nearing their destination. The manners of the broker from Andhra had morphed in the mean time. He behaved rudely. He herded the labourers with a stick in hand as though they were cattle.

The train stopped at a small station. The broker from Andhra, with a wave of his stick, and in Telugu asked the labourers to alight. Everyone understood and got off the train, although he spoke to them in Telugu. They performed their morning chores at the station toilet, and ate the food they had brought along. Purna ate the ground roasted rice that he had carried. Other brokers were present at the station. The labourers were divided into three groups. The groups were carted away in three different trucks. Purna reached a dry riverbed. He had been hired to work in a brick kiln. He had not worked in a brick kiln before, though he knew how to bake semi-cylindrical clay shingles that they used for roofing at home. It did not take him long to learn to make and bake bricks.

Purna returned home in the month of May. He was left with less than five hundred rupees from the wages he had earned after he

had paid off his debt and met his every day expenses. Out of this, he spent two hundred rupees to buy his ticket. He also bought new clothes and shoes to replace the old and worn out ones. He bought a saree for Premashila, biscuits and dress for his son and reached home with two hundred rupees.

When Purna reached home, Premashila was cooking wild sweet cassava she had collected from the forest and Hrudananda was crawling on the veranda. This time round, Jalandhar had not arranged a truck for free for the labourers to travel from Gamada Road station to Gamada village. So Purna had walked the distance and was tired.

Yet, he was rapturous as he reached home. Premashila forgot that she was boiling sweet cassava and sat down on the floor. Purna took Hrudananda in his arm and asked Premashila to open his bag. Purna opened the packet of biscuits with great excitement and fed Hrudananda a piece. Hrudananda spat it out. Purna asked Premashila to have a bite. She looked at the biscuit. She ate a little bit of it, and it tasted rotten. She spat it out and saw closely into the piece. It was mildewed.

"Even the biscuit vendor cheated you," said Premashila and threw out the biscuit packet.

(vi)

By the November of 1997 Purna and Premashila had three children. Apart from Hrudananda, there were a son and a daughter. Meanwhile, Purna had fallen victim to the cycle of usury-and-interest-and-payment, and had his land first mortgaged and then sold off. Purna had gone as an indentured labourer to Andhra Pradesh under the employ of, first, Jalandhar, and then, of Jahangir and his health had been ruined. His rib cage stuck out under his skin and he had lost his appetite. By November 1997 his debt had mounted to about four thousand rupees. Neither Jalandhar nor Jahangir was ready to send him alone as a migrant labourer against a loan of four thousand rupees. So, both Purna and Premashila migrated out as bonded labourers. Hrudananda worked at a small eatery that sold tea and snacks at Sanagamada. The couple left their other two little kids with Purna's younger brother. They borrowed five thousand rupees. They paid off the earlier loan of four thousand. They gave five hundred rupees to the younger brother of Purna. With the remaining three or four hundred rupees they left for Andhra, to bake bricks. All through the journey Premashila was quiet and without food; she did not even drink water properly.

Purna, of course, kept behaving like an experienced person. This time they were accompanied by a broker of Jahangir.

For Purna, there was a difference this time; having been accompanied by his wife, he could not put up in the common shanty with the other indentured labourers. He built another room on the dry riverbed, away from the long rows of dormitories: this was the same riverbed where he had lived before, when he had first begun life as a migrant after the birth of his son Hrudananda. Some young men who had accompanied Purna then had also come with their wives and children this time, like Purna, and were staying in separate shanties. But then they and their wives looked like old men and women, and among them Premashila appeared rather young.

Purna and Premashila earned forty to fifty rupees a day. They paid twenty-five rupees towards their loan and kept fifteen to twenty rupees for themselves.

The floor of Premashila's hut was made of the broken bricks from the kiln. It was plastered with potter's clay. Six pieces of wood that had once been used in the brick kiln made the pillars of the roof of the hut, and a few bamboo sticks and some dried grass reeds made up the roof. The walls were made of broken bricks held together with clay mortar. The height of the hut measured up to Purna's waist. Had it been any lower, Purna would have been forced to enter the cottage crawling. Since it was his waist-high, he could bend and enter inside. Had the height been more, the walls of the shanty would not have supported the weight of wood and bamboo sticks. The hearth was outside the cottage. They cooked only rice on this hearth.

For two reasons Premashila's fairytale hut was different from the huts of all other couples who lived on that riverbed. One, she had also built a small veranda bordering the hut. She could have built a thatch over four pieces of sticks sunk in the four corners of the shanty. As she had six pieces of wood, she had decided to extend the house by a yard or so towards the veranda. Two, she kept the cottage tidy and clean, polished with primal colours of clay.

It was the veranda and the cleanliness of the hut that attracted the attention of the proprietor of the brick kiln along with his clerk and friends. In course of time, they made their appearance with liquor and eatables. They partook of Premashila's hospitality by eating her cooked rice soaked in water overnight, with the salted dry fish that they brought. They were generous enough to leave behind some of the fish for Premashila also. Purna lay drunk and unconscious in his hut. While he lay thus unconscious, the proprietor and his employees either

raped Premashila or took her by force elsewhere. At times Purna was really not unconscious, he only feigned unconsciousness, when Premashila was being abducted.

That it was impossible to go on living this life of chaos and uncertainties, Premashila understood before long. She remembered a song her father used to croon when she was a little girl. The song's burden was this: if the husband was of no use, the wife had to do the shift for the husband; she had to go to the Gods and ask for their blessings. But then the riverbank where the brick kiln stood lacked a single tree, not to speak of a God. So Premashila started saving money. She saved despite that waist-high cottage, despite the unauthorised entry of so many people, despite being molested, despite the uninvited appearance of people all through the day and the night, despite there being no door in the cottage and despite the back breaking toil through the day. She also collected from the brokers information about the arrival and departure of trains. Towards the end of May, when she had saved enough money for the fare, she said to Purna that she was bleeding profusely either due to her period or due to some other irregularity, and she begged that guests must not come that day, or night.

That night Premashila and Purna fled from the brick kiln. They first rode a train and travelled some distance and then took another train bound for Gamada Road. In the first week of June 1998 they arrived at the railway station at Gamada Road.

By the time they were back at the Gamada Road station they were looking like a couple of old, languid humans, although they were of thirty-two and twenty-eight years of age respectively. The ravages of time, the molestations and atrocities, and the life in morbidic environ had made them progeriac.

Let me thank the journalist Rajib for the above-mentioned facts. He had recorded their statements and photographed them. During my investigation he had played the recordings for me and had shown me the photographs. I had wanted to know why he had not published the news at the time.

He had answered that he had sought his father's opinion regarding this. But then his father had shooed him away. His father, Bagarti the carter, had also been an agent for the transportation of indentured labourers and he had sent Purna out on his first errand as an indentured labourer.

I had toured the area in 1999 as the Starvation Commissioner. By then a whopping number of the village population had been swallowed into the debt trap.

Earlier, about fifteen years ago, I had worked in that area for a year. At that time not many people of that economic stratum had been in debt, at least not to this extent. The forests too had not been so depleted. Of course, Jalandhar had the disrepute as a timber smuggler even then, but he did not have such a sprawling financial empire. Jahangir was a contractor for the railway gang men. There had been a few court cases against them on charges of smuggling from the forests, and railway robberies, and they along with some of their brothers and sons had served various terms in jail.

The economy of this region had undergone a metamorphosis by 1999. The newspapers had been publishing reports repeatedly about the droughts, starvation deaths and the large-scale migration of people as indentured labourers. Alongside, the news of distress sale of paddy too was being reported.

Gamada Road had grown into a big township. There were around twenty-five rice mills in and around that area. At least fifteen of these belonged to Jalandhar, Jahangir and their brothers. It came to my notice during the tour of the villages that, on an average, thirty percent of the male members had left their homes as indentured labourers. Many buildings had been constructed in Gamada Road. A few hotels and lodging houses had also come up.

Except for a few young men, the rest moved on from indebted labourers to become indentured migrant labourers. A typical contracted labourer first incurred a debt at a high rate of interest and then found it impossible to repay it. Then he mortgaged his land. By 1999 it was not possible for people like Jalandhar and Jahangir to track such enormous number of records of mortgaged land. That was why they had in their employ brokers like Bagarti, the carter, or Gobinda Bhulia. The land was at first given to the owner of the land, who had mortgaged it, to till. The tiller rejoiced and put his mind to the cultivation in the fond hope that someday he would reclaim the rights over the land. But when the tiller had parted with half the produce from the land, it became impossible to sustain the cultivation. In the end he sold his land, or left it fallow, went off as an indebted migrant labourer, first alone, and then with his whole family. The story of the indentureship of Purna and Premashila is not very different from the account narrated above.

No migrant labourer was ever able to move outside Orissa without the permission of Jalandhar and Jahangir. No broker from outside the state was able to stay in any hotel or lodging house without the permission of these two. And in that total stretch, ranging from Dunguripalli to Titilagarh and from Kesinga to Khariar Road, no other broker without such permission had entry. Jahangir represented the Opposition as the Member of Legal Council and Jalandhar represented the Ruling Party as the Chairman of the Municipality. There had been a business arrangement between them despite the apparent show of political hostility.

Because of his clout in the railways, Jahangir had monopoly over moneylending to the railway labourers and contract work for supply of labourers. He had evicted Jalandhar out of the railway property. The passbooks of four thousand railway gang men had been impounded by Jahangir. He also looked after transportation of smuggled timber by train. He had built houses on the railway property and had let these out to his brokers. He had also sold off some of the railways land. His operations had been distributed among his sons and brothers. Jahangir was in charge of the rice mills and sawmills. Alamgir, his brother, looked after timber smuggling and the loan to the gang porters. Aurangzeb, his son, looked after land mortgage and liquor business. Another son, Babar, took care of the transportation of the migrant labourers and recovery of loans from them.

Likewise, Jalandhar looked after the sawmills and rice mills. His brother Sachinder looked after the liquor trade and wood smuggling. The other brother Mahinder looked after the mortgage of land, import of paddy and the transportation of migrant labourers. He was also in charge of the road contract work on the Raipur road.

There was a clear understanding between Jalandhar and Jahangir over the business of indentured labourers: no one would detain the other party's truck; no one would hold up the other party's migrant bonded labourer. They had agreed to settle any dispute, in the event of its arising, later. The only password needed for the dispute to stop in its tracks and the migrant labourer not to be detained en route was "I'm Jahangir's man" or "I am Jalandhar's man."

Around this time, in the villages surrounding Gamada Road gemstones were discovered: diamonds, jades, ruby, sapphire, cat's eye, emerald, gold nuggets and argentite. When the forests were cleared off ancient trees, and then the local people dug out the massive roots for fuel wood, these gemstones surfaced. The families of Jalandhar and Jahangir also took control of this business. It is amazing that though

these businessmen had discovered such easily acquirable wealth and profitable business, they did not abstain from usury, and trafficking in bonded and indentured labour.

(viii)

I had earlier submitted a report on what I had seen while on a tour of this area during December 1998 and January 1999. It will be relevant to produce here a summary of what I had observed about the transportation of indentured labourers at Gamada Road.

That night I was walking around the town, clad in kurta-pajama and wrapped in a shawl. Migrant labourers were moving in, arriving in open big and small trucks, mini buses, trekkers—in every kind of vehicle. This trafficking of labourers went on from about 7 pm to 10 pm. Every such vehicle was escorted by one or two young bikers. With a little attention, it was clear that the vehicles were heading at three destinations: Gamada Road station, Jalandhar's camp and Jahangir's camp. I had a look at Jahangir's large property bounded by a tall wall sprawling over an area, ten acres, as per hearsay, but about five acres in my estimate. The entire property belonged to the railways. Around twenty vehicles were parked in front of his house. Vehicles were coming in and going out. There were women, children and men of all ages and sizes in them.

The camp of Jalandhar was relatively small. I was accompanied by the Tehsildar. He found out from some locals that the brothers of Jalandhar were engaged in different trades in different places. Illegal lumbering, operation of sawmill, usury, theft of precious stones and trafficking of workers went on at different locations. The rice mills and the storage agency for supply of food grains to the poor functioned from different venues. The business at Jalandhar's depot of indentured labourers seemed to run briskly. I could figure out after a quick look that in the godown-of-slaves of Jalandhar, the indentured labourers had a very transient stay. They were departing by the same vehicles that transported them in. They only halted for half an hour or so in the godown-of-slaves. In a manner of speaking, there was a slight difference between the trade of Jalandhar and the trade of Jahangir. The migrant workers, coming to Jahangir, were staying in his godown-of-slaves for a day or two or even longer. But Jalandhar had a quick disposal system. It thus came about that there were twenty vehicles in front of Jahangir's house and only five in front of Jalandhar's house.

But then both Jalandhar and Jahangir had the same level of business in trafficking of labour. In my estimate, of course, Jalandhar's business was slightly bigger than his rival's.

I reached Gamada Road station at about 10 pm. I strolled around and overheard the discussions of the milling migrant labourers at the railway station. I could guess the identity of a couple of brokers from their conversation with the labourers. They were carrying briefcases and their expensive briefcases stood out against the sacks, bundles and tin boxes of the labourers. At this point I realized that I was stalked by someone. I stopped, turned around and looked at the stalker. I figured out from his face and dress that he was one among those who rode a motorbike and shepherded workers towards the man-transporting van. His shirts and trousers had multiple pockets. He was a tall, stout and muscular young man, aged around twenty-five to thirty years. I asked him why he was tailing me. Surprise of surprises, he did not threaten me. His right hand moved to his right trouser pocket and he said calmly that he was there to see that his workers were not intercepted by other brokers. He said he did not give a damn about what I did, but that if I interfered with his work he would kill me. I took off my shawl and, trembling a little from the bitter cold, showed him my light kurta-pajama.

"Look here," I said, "You must be aware now that I am no broker. Now can you show me the revolver you have in your pocket?" That man, clad in jeans and jacket with many pockets, took out the revolver from his right pant pocket and said, "Leave at once or else you will rue the time."

I smiled a little. "Do you know who I am?" I asked.

At once the young man put the revolver back in his pocket and ran away, jumping over the railway tracks. I knew from my watch that it was 11 o'clock in the night.

That evening I had asked the Officer-In-Charge of the police station to wait for me at the police station. But I had not given him any clue about my investigation.

It would be in place to record one more thing here. In the Government controlled shops rice used to sell at between two and five rupees a kilo. About thirty percent of the population used to migrate as workers for half of the year. On pen and paper, however, their share of the rice used to be shown as being sold to them. Certain specific complaints regarding this had been brought to my notice and I had taken action against a few retailers. But then all the storage agencies at and around Gamada Road were owned by either Jalandhar or

Jahangir or by their proxies. The rice was not going anywhere. The production was on the downward spiral. Paddy was being bought only on pen and paper. Fraudulent documents showing that the Food Corporation of India was buying the rice and selling them through the Public Distribution System were manufactured.

So I was investigating into the activities of a few dealers and millers. The OIC of the police station had no idea about the kind of investigation I had in mind this day. At seven in the evening there was not a single officer present at the police station, and I was going around with the Tehsildar in Gamada Road town. I came to know afterwards that the OIC, having got wind of the armed biker escorting the labour-trafficker stalking me, had come out in search of me. The aforesaid stalker had, in fact, vanished at the sight of the police officer.

We arrested one broker after the police officer joined me. In fact, the officer arrested him and handed him over to the railway police. Around midnight when I was present at the police station, a minibus pulled over at the back of the building with about one hundred migrant workers. The man who got off the driver's seat was Raipur, the brother of Jalandhar. The officer at once began to chat with Raipur. I was eavesdropping on their conversation from a dark corner of the police station.

Raipur spent that night in the custody of the police. The labourer contractor from Andhra remained in the custody of the railway police. Based on his complaint, one of Jahangir's sons was also taken into custody. The matter created a hue and cry all through the night in and around Gamada Road. The gun totting labourer-herders went into hiding.

It never quite happened that a son of Jahangir and a brother of Jalandhar were detained through the night at the local police station. The law in this respect is, however, very lenient. They were released on bail the day after I left Gamada Road for some other place.

At the time of the uproar regarding the starvation death of Premashila, two court cases were in progress. One of the two was against Raipur. At the moment, he happens to be a seasoned leader and the chief spokesperson for the Opposition.

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In the June of 1998 Purna and Premashila returned to Gamada village, as has been stated earlier. They remained in hiding from Gobinda

Bhulia and Jahangir, their moneylenders, though the moneylenders were aware of their return. The moneylenders, however, were not making demands for repayment of loan. To tell the truth, the moneylenders had got back their money many times over, but they never informed this to Purna. Thus, despite the repayment of the loan, Purna and Premashila lived through ever-present terror.

The item of news that published the story of the starvation death of Premashila also made a reference to the fact that one of the kidneys of Purna Bhoi had been stolen in Andhra Pradesh. Purna had died in January 2000 and his body had been cremated. It is not easy to confirm now whether his kidney had been stolen. Some say that perhaps his lower abdomen bore a mark of incision, but this does not prove or disprove anything.

There is an *Anganwadi* centre in Sanagamada. Both the workers and the cook of that place are of *bhulia* caste. *Bhulias* are weavers, and do not belong to the scheduled caste. Still the *kandhs* do not eat food cooked by them. The children, of course, do not observe such taboo. So the villagers get raw lentils and rice from the *Anganwadi* centre in lieu of the old people's share of the food and distribute this to the beneficiaries.

Fifteen days before the news of the death of Premashila was published in December 2000, another news story about another starvation death had been broken. This was that of Gajendra. The name of Gajendra Bhoi's wife was also Premashila. Gajendra Bhoi had also been a migrant labourer and he had worked under a government contractor in Delhi. He had lost one of his hands. He had died from septicaemia and oedema. I have already furnished a report on this earlier.

When the news of Gajendra's death due to starvation was published, the Block Development Officer, the Tehsildar, the Officer-in-Charge of the police station, and the CDPO, the lady officer in charge of child nutrition, had paid a visit to Sanagamada. From the 15th of November 2000, the practice of giving cooked food instead of dry rations was introduced in Sanagamada. A woman from the village and Sucharita, an aunt of Purna, the wife of one of his cousins in the village several generations removed, were taken as cooks. Premashila and her two sons ate one meal at the centre. Premashila took home raw rice and lentils towards the share of Irudananda.

Around January 2000, after Purna's death, Premashila lived by collecting firewood from the forest. She would not have the strength to be a lumberjack, so she cut and gathered only firewood. She would

go to the forest to cut and size the raw firewood and leave it out to dry. The next day she arranged it into bundles, and sold it on the sidewalk of the main road in Sanagamada. On an average she earned twenty rupees in two days.

On the 20th of November, as she was entering the village carrying two bundles of firewood from the forest, Premashila collapsed. The cooked food distribution centre at Sanagamada had been only five days old then. The villagers picked her and laid her on her bed. They fed her some gruel. The *Anganwadi* cook used to serve food for her. But Premashila was unable to swallow, even when liquid food was forced into her mouth.

The two bundles of firewood that Premashila had collected from the jungle lay on the crossing where the road turned to the village. No one touched it. Not even the wood traders of Jalandhar and Jahangir. There was, of course, no question of their touching it. Renowned timber merchants as they were, they had no need for fuel wood.

Hrudananda, the eldest son of Premashila, used to work at the tea and snacks shop of Sanagamada. The CDPO heard about the collapsed and bedridden condition of Premashila on 22nd November and reached the village with a female health worker on 23rd November. The health worker collected Premashila's blood sample on a slide to test it for malaria. She gave Premashila six de-worming pills to be taken twice daily for three days, and thirty once-daily iron-folic-acid tablets. The female health worker diagnosed Premashila's case as an extreme case of anemia. Premashila could hardly eat by then. Sucharita, her aunt in the village, and who cooked at the *Anganwadi* center, fed her two mouthfuls with great effort. I do not believe, therefore, that Premashila could have taken the tablets given by the health worker. Be that as it may, the CDPO left instructions in the *Anganwadi* register that Premashila along with her younger son and daughter be given two cooked meals a day.

There is a hospital in Sanagamada. In official language it is known as a 'one-doctor-hospital'. Earlier the hospital functioned from one of the two rooms of the village panchayat office building. After the responsibility of the food-for-work programme and the distribution of low-priced and free rice under various schemes of the government fell on the panchayat, and its activities expanded, no space was left for the doctor in the office building. Because, the room used as a dispensary earlier, was converted to a godown for food grains.

The hospital had very few equipments. It had the same stock of medicines that a rural health worker would keep in her house: oral

rehydration salts, paracetamol, mebendazole, metronidazole, chloroquine, primaquine, vitamins, tetracycline. The hospital had a pharmacist. At his request, the villagers had put up a hut with a roof of baked country shingles, sharing a wall of the panchayat building. The hospital ran from there.

This one-doctor-hospital has been in operation since 1994. Despite this utter disarray, the post of the doctor at the hospital never remained unmanned. As a matter of fact, it has never remained vacant so far. The doctors who are posted in this hospital reside at Gamada Road. They come to the hospital two or three times a week. The pharmacist manages in the doctor's absence. Even when the doctors are present in the hospital, their work does not differ perceptibly from the pharmacist's.

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On the 26th of November, the BDO, the doctor of the one-doctor-hospital and the CDPO had come to Gamada and looked up Premashila. The doctor had come on his motorbike. He had brought with him a bottle of saline. He put her on the drip by hanging the saline bottle from a rafter in her house. He told the brother-in-law of Premashila that she needed to move to the hospital at Gamada Road. The BDO had volunteered to transport her for free, in his office vehicle, to Gamada Road where he said, he would admit her to the hospital. But the brother-in-law said that he would not be able to meet the other expenses and declined.

On 27th November the doctor showed up again. He administered another drip of glucose-saline to Premashila. The health worker remained present with the patient and meanwhile, the doctor examined other villagers. Later the doctor told the brother-in-law of Premashila that if he did not admit her to the hospital, her death would be publicized as a starvation death and that the brother-in-law would be arrested for it. In the least he would be prosecuted. The doctor recommended that he should reach the hospital in Gamada Road with Premashila. He assured him that he would be around and would get Premashila admitted to the hospital.

Out of fear of prosecution, the brother-in-law consulted the village chief and his kinfolk in the village, and with their help carried Premashila in an upturned twine cot to the block level Primary Health Centre at Gamada Road on November 27, in the evening. A few stray cattle and pigs, and a couple of jabbering laggards loitered at the health

centre. The premises were covered in darkness. The village chief went around and traced the doctor. Of course, the person he had taken for the doctor was in fact the pharmacist.

The pharmacist said that since there was no staff nurse, the indoor patients' department of the hospital was defunct. At first the villagers could not understand the meaning of *nurse*. When they did, they said that Premashila's sister-in-law would perform the duty of a nurse. The pharmacist, the scavenger of the hospital and the jabbering idlers had a bellyful of laughter when they heard this. The village chief asked his way to the Sanagamada doctor's residence, situated at Gamada Road. The doctor's residence was crowded. The doctor was very busy with his private practice. The crowd of patients and their attendants did not disperse for a long time. When they thinned out, the doctor left for his nursing home.

The hurt and insulted village chief returned and the people of the village prepared to take Premashila back to Gamada, in the same upturned twine cot.

It was getting dark. The pharmacist of the PHC told the villagers: "Take the patient to Balangir, or else she will not survive."

Premashila spat out into the dark. As if Premashila said, as the village chief interpreted her words later: Keep your advice to yourself. I don't need your advice. She then told the villagers: "Take me home. How much more trouble will you all take for my sake? What will happen to my children? What can the doctor do? If I have more years, I'll live. When my *ayush* is over, I'll die."

They returned to the village.

On the 30th of November Rajib had come to the village of Gamada. He took a photo of Premashila lying prostrate in bed. On the same day he developed the roll and sent the copy of the photograph to Bhubaneswar.

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Premashila breathed her last on the 1st of December 2000 around 3 pm. Hrudananda was then at the tea-and-snacks shop at Sanagamada. He came at about half past three on receiving the news. Hrudananda lit the funeral pyre and by five o'clock the body of Premashila had been cremated.

Two hours before her death, between 12.45 pm and 1.15 pm to be precise, Rajib had faxed the news of Premashila's death due to starvation to an Oriya daily and an English daily published from

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Bhubaneswar. On the morning of the 2nd December this news flashed in the morning edition of one Oriya daily and an English newspaper published from Delhi.

Now a days the local Sarpanch has been assigned the primary responsibility of preventing starvation. A Sarpanch of a village must provide free food for ten days as soon as he gets information of a case of starvation in a village. Going by the statement of the Sarpanch of Gamada, the people of Gamada did not allow him entry into the village. The panchayat office was in Sanagamada and the Sarpanch had to pass through Gamada on his way from his own village to Sanagamada. The Sarpanch earlier belonged to the Party of Jalandhar, and now had defected to Jahangir's Party. The Ward Member of Gamada, however, had been elected from Jalandhar's Party once again, as before. The Ward Member had a greater clout in the village of Gamada (including Sanagamada).

Since the Sarpanch had swapped party, he had been prevented from entering Gamada. When he came to the panchayat office in Sanagamada, he avoided Gamada on the way and took the winding route through the farmland to reach there. Let alone the account of Premashila's death, he was utterly clueless about a starvation case in Gamada.

Even, on the day I had gone to Gamada for investigation, the Sarpanch did not turn up to adduce his evidence. He had filed a first-information-report in the police station that on his way to appear as a witness before me, he had been intercepted by the men of Jalandhar, and had been forced to retreat. In the afternoon he had come through the farmland and went to the police station first to submit his FIR. I was present in the panchayat office then. The police brought him there in a vehicle and I recorded his statements.

On the 2nd of December there had been a heated debate on the issue in the Legal Council. The Collector had been asked through a faxed message to furnish a detailed report. On account of power failure and problems with the telephone lines, the fax reached the Collectorate after midnight. The following day, that is, on the 3rd of December, by morning, the Collector upbraided the BDO and the Tehsildar to provide the facts relating to this case within twenty-four hours.

The 2nd December editions of newspapers published from Bhubaneswar were available at Gamada Road and the block office on 3rd December. On the same day the BDO, the Tehsildar and the OIC of the police station went to Gamada.

In this part of Orissa, the people from *kandb* community perform in two phases the purification and mourning rituals following a death among the kin. The first phase, the *telagbara* or *ti*: the-ritual-of-oils, spans three days. During this period they do not talk to any outsider. On the third day, there is a minor consecration and purification ritual with new earthen pots, new wicks and earthen lamps, curd, green gram, raw rice and water.

On the tenth day after the death, the last purifying rites are performed. Friends and relatives from the outer kinship circle and the villagers get together on this tenth day. Friends and relatives of the deceased go to the crossing where the road enters the village. The villagers had invoked the spirit of Premashila from here, the crossing where lay the two bundles of firewood that Premashila had carried before collapsing on that day in November. They had put seven hanks of thread in the pot, along with curd, green gram, raw rice and popped rice flakes. But there had been no feasting or wining.

On the 3rd of December, when the BDO, the Tehsildar and the police officer had visited Gamada, no one from the community spoke to them, as they wore strict mourning and it was a period of silent mourning and secluded impurity. The officers had gone there again on the 4th of December. On the 5th of December they had dispatched copies of their inquiry report to the Collector and the government.

I must mention one fact about their report here. On the 2nd of December, ten sacks of rice each had been sent to Gamada on behalf of both Jalandhar and Jahangir. This rice was to be used for the tenth-day feast of the mourning. But the rice remained unutilised in view of the impending investigation into the starvation death. At first the rice was kept at the village crossing. Then it was taken to the *Angamwadi* center. And finally, to the house of the late Premashila and then to the house of her brother-in-law. During the time of my investigation, that rice lay intact. The sacks had not been opened.

The rice sent in by Jalandhar and Jahangir was in effect sent in by their proxy storage agents. This rice was the same two-rupee-a-kilo rice that the dealers [the papers had been manufactured to this effect] had *received* and *disbursed* to the people under the public distribution system of the government.

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I know that this report of mine will not suit anyone. Had I asserted this to be a case of starvation death, the Opposition would have

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celebrated. If I had ruled out the case of death due to starvation, the Ruling Party would have rejoiced. It would not be an exaggeration to say that Premashila had been starving for almost a year. She should have been given food since one year back.

Fine. Everyone, beginning with the local Sarpanch up to me, is to own the blame for this. But then will the charge of starvation death of Premashila be vindicated, if the Sarpanch, the Tehsildar, the BDO, the Collector and the Starvation Commissioner are hanged to death? This is an issue of utter destitution. And in this process of pauperization, the timber smugglers, the moneylenders, the brokers in labour trafficking, the millers and the dealers of public distribution system are all involved. The leaders of these groups now enjoy and wield enormous power in our democratic polity. Without a summary delineation of their roles, the truth behind the poverty-induced death of Premashila could not have been described. Please do not think of me either as an agent of the Ruling Party or as a courtier of the Opposition. Please do not accuse me of the tyranny of the clerks or of the indifference of a government officer.

Therefore, dear rulers! You had deputed me to conduct the investigation. I have committed to paper whatever I observed. I am not omniscient. No one is omniscient in the world. I have not willfully falsified, not exaggerated anything, nor concealed any fact.

So please discuss this report threadbare. Please point out its flaws. But please do not chuck it into the trash bin. I am a mere messenger. Murder of a messenger is not in accordance with the royal etiquette. Do not murder the messenger.

Now I will attempt a definitive answer to the only question posed by this investigation: *Is the death of Premashila due to starvation or not?* Now Jahangir is with the Ruling Party and rubbishes the allegation. Jalandhar, who is with the Opposition, is claiming that the death is due to starvation. Three years ago, in the same village, Purna, the husband of Premashila had died. Jahangir had then blamed Purna's death on starvation.

Jalandhar had said that Purna's death was not due to starvation. On those days Jalandhar was with the ruling party and Jahangir was in the opposition.

The moment we use the words *starvation death*, it escapes beyond the boundaries of fair and impartial judgement. To tell the truth, these words have jeopardized the process of impartial judgement. I have already written about the kind of starvation, semi-starvation or malnutrition that Premashila suffered. I have also noted that a few days

before Premashila's death, she and her children had been admitted to the free kitchen in the village. Such free kitchens cannot stall poverty; but in a democratic form of government we are bound to make this free food available. Some people, particularly government officials, have raised a question about this: "For how long will we go on feeding the deprived like this? The Sarpanch will provide food for ten days, and the government officials will provide for a month or two. And thereafter?"

My answer to these people is: "For as long as is required. In earlier days the zamindars and the landlords used to feed the poor and the needy. They used to look after people like Premashila's father who are important to our society. I am not carrying a brief for the system of landlordism. But after the abolition of this system, this responsibility of feeding the destitute rests on the democratically elected governments."

This Report will also displease certain sections of the press. An unequivocal confirmation of the allegation of starvation death would have made the headlines. But the episode of deaths of Purna and Premashila is the story of deforestation, and of debt trap, and of the hunters who laid the traps of denudation of forests and usury, and is so complex that it cannot easily make into the headlines of a daily newspaper.

My reply to them in all humility is this: "The confirmation or the denial of the charge of starvation death will not pave a solution to the problem."

"I have not admitted the allegation of starvation death because I was afraid," will the problem be solved if you allege this?

Had I confirmed the allegation of starvation death, true, I would have been a hero in the newspaper headlines for a day; but will it solve the problem?

I had stayed for a day in the district headquarters in order to give a chance to the general public to depose evidence. Even one witness did not appear. Ask the people to answer for this. But then, this is a minor question. The fundamental question is: how is it that people like Jalandhar and Jahangir, who are the root causes of starvation, come to be elected every time? Why do the people vote for them? This is a democracy. You must ask this question to the people."

Translated from Oriya by Himanshu S Mohapatra



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A Gay...What?

Manjeet Baruah

It was an interminable wait in my apartment. A few minutes could feel like centuries, waiting quietly, restlessly, desperately to hear the doorbell ring, and for me to open it and see... an unknown, unexpected face in the depth of a wintry evening. Another man, another face, another heart—what was this endless search? There was silence for an answer. A company, a sense of companionship from a stranger—is it ever possible! But the heart, it's no more with me. It's beyond me, roaming wildly in the jungles of its world, its own separate, dense world. It had its own ways. So, have my longings outgrown me? I wondered. The others haven't been till now, but will Gilmesh then be the answer to my heart, or my self...? It was truly an interminable wait.

In the half an hour that I waited sitting at the edge of my sprawling bed, my breathing as if made the only sound that I could hear inside the room. I looked around my one-room apartment. Everything was in order, the clutter pushed inside the cupboards. It needed to look clean, I thought, even if not fresh. And the bed?

The only dirt that remained was in the edges of the blades of the ceiling fan. But in the dim light from the lamp, that wouldn't be visible. The window had been left open for the cold draught to enter. Occasionally, a dry brown leaf would fly in, carried by the draught, from the darkness outside. Winter had arrived. The cold draught should have been left to freeze the air outside than rushing in through the open window, I told myself. But maybe I wanted to feel a shiver in my flesh, shiver down my spine. A shiver of anxiousness, or was it one of lament at my own helplessness at waiting for a stranger, once again? I made one last survey of the room, and feeling safe, settled once again into waiting.

Finally, the doorbell rang and I jumped up with a start. But how

strange that the very steps which should have swept me off to reach for the round brass doorknob seemed to have got stuck in the floor! It weren't the feet though. It was the heart, that sinking sensation of the heart whispering louder than a temple bell, "Beware! The door separates again your life and death, sorrow and hope. Beware!" How tireless are the efforts of the conscience, I thought, that these whisperings would ring in my ears every time I try to open the door for a stranger. But maybe, I wondered, it's just a habit for my conscience too to sound those bells of caution. Habit! Then this wait, has it also become another habit of my life? I felt the cold air on my face and my fingers, and once again felt within the shiver in my flesh, down my spine. Eventually, my feet did move, however hesitant and hopeless, the steps were over the washed marble floor, and my fingers, in a nervous jerk, turned the doorknob. There! Gilmesh stood in front of me! Could he be my man? Could he be my hope?

Time slipped by, with the temperature dipping slightly every hour. It began to feel colder and colder. The weather outside had as if stealthily, invisibly entered into every nook and corner of the room. Still, neither of us thought of shutting the open window. We could still see the reflection of the streetlight glowing in one of the windowpanes. It was a dull glow on the windowpane that looked black, like the colour of night. The street outside too had become quieter by now. Everything felt like indicating the evening slipping into another night. I wondered how cold the iron of the lamp-post must have become. But there is pleasure in the feel of shiver, isn't it? I asked myself. Did Gilmesh also feel that pleasure?

From the darkness outside, visible through the window, I looked at Gilmesh, lying next to me and breathing deeply. I could even hear his breathing along with mine. "It's strange, but I feel as if you aren't any stranger to me," I said, looking into his eyes. He didn't utter a word, but I could feel as if his round eyes asked me "Why?" "I feel as if I know your mind, have known you for long," I said, pulling the blanket over us till our shoulders. The dim light from the lamp near the window made the room appear swimming in some quieted, yet tense nerve of feelings. The light through the cane lampshade made webs of light and shadow on the walls and the ceiling.

"Is it possible? I have met you only a while ago," Gilmesh wondered aloud. "Can feelings be so sudden and deep?"

"It can be or maybe not. But the depth in your eyes, your soft

face, your firm hands, I feel as if they aren't strangers to me. Yes, how is it possible? Strange!"

"That's only my body. My face, my hands, they aren't my mind," Gilmesh said.

I didn't have an answer. Helplessness cannot contrive answers. It only has questions and answers, which too, are really questions. And the mind is only blankness, shrouded in a veil of mist, as misty and grey as the waters of the Brahmaputra in the winters. But the river has its summer when the mist vanishes in the air. Where is that summer in my life?

"Should I get some coffee for you?" I said, trying to look away from him towards the shadows on the ceiling, trying to imagine the mist hanging over the river, perhaps trying to look within me.

"No. No. Please don't go," Gilmesh pleaded. He added after a brief pause, "Don't go...."

I looked out through the open window. It was a starry evening though the moon wasn't visible. It appeared like the ceiling of my room, only that there was more shadow than the twinkling light from the stars. The cold draught through the window felt dry on my face, leaving a tingle of burning sensation as it rubbed against my nose and the lobes of my ears. With one hand lying carelessly on his chest, I wondered again if Gilmesh could be the man, if he could be my hope. But hope against what?

"I feel strange lying next to you, Gilmesh," I said, looking at him once again, away from the starry sky.

"Umm. Why?" he said, pulling me closer. "You don't like me?"

"Do I like you?...I don't know. Do I need you? I don't know either. Yet this storm of feelings blowing within for you, I know that it's true." After a pause, I continued, "Deep inside, I know that no man or woman can pull me out of this sense of emptiness and longing that I carry within. But what makes me feel so, as if below my skin there is nothing, just nothing? What is this craving for something to feel filled below my skin? And how strange that I want to push you out of my mind, from anywhere closer to me, but still I hold onto you. I touch you, want to kiss you, even if for the last time! My heart, has it then left me that I can no longer recognize it! Does it roam in its own world, into which I am barred entry? Do I no longer know my life? Is it so? Is life so? A bewildering maze?"

But it wasn't the first time that I was speaking thus to someone, I told myself. Then what brings this repeat of myself, of my words, of my emotions? Is it from a search that ends with a body? Has my

world become so narrow? No. No. It can't be, or else that emptiness within could have been filled long ago. So many bodies, beautiful bodies have I come across, have tasted. But those fleshs couldn't fill the flesh below my skin. It's not the scent of flesh, not the feel of flesh that can rejuvenate my young dying skin, my dying body. That is my longing, I know it. Yet, how come only the longing has become the truth of my life and nothing else, nothing else?

I still wonder if that night ended as any different from the many others. Gilmesh had made the offer of his body. But I had wished for his heart. The heart and the body, they are parts of the same whole. Yet between us, they existed separated, distanced from each other. Then what is it that is left from this distance of the two? Isn't it a heap of ashes? Another heap of ashes? Another drift with another stranger?

Gilmesh stood next to the corner of the bed, pulling up his trousers, putting on his brown leather jacket and tying the red muffler around his neck into a delicate knot. It was time for him to leave. But I still remained in bed, as before, lying under the blanket and looking at him, looking intently at all his actions. It was as if I didn't want to miss even a single movement of his body, a single emotion of his face. Finally, he was tying the shoelaces. But suddenly, he stopped tying them and took off his shoes again. He got into the bed, curled up nearer to me but without getting inside the blanket, and kissed me on my forehead with his cold lips. Was he coming back to me? Someone, at last?

"I am scared of you," was all he said, coming very close to my face, and smiling. But it didn't feel like a smile. It didn't feel like anything, other than colder than the draught outside, now blowing stronger than before. Why did he do it? I continued to look at him, unable to utter that simple, eternal word, "Why" in reply. I couldn't tell him how terrible that word could be, as if my whole world depended upon the absence of that word. But did Gilmesh need a reply? He didn't. He had only more to speak.

"I am scared of your feelings, of your longing. They are bondage. I have just come out of it. And how hard it was! Come out. Come out of it. The world is much more beyond it. Come out of it!"

Life, is it then a mere game of passion for the warmth of flesh, only to feel the offerings in the skin? Then what do I do with the hollowness beneath my skin? I wanted to ask Gilmesh, to explain my own life to me, or maybe just to make him wait a little longer that

way. Helplessness could re-invent itself in so many ways. But a hard, cold pain, as if, choked my throat. It was the draught, I thought. I was unable to speak, and before my eyes, Gilmesh walked slowly towards the door, opened it and vanished from my dim, misty world as easily as he had entered hours ago. I continued to lie in bed, thinking about him and his words. Was he the truth that I was looking for, the cure to my frailty in the mind, in the heart? Were his words the uttering of my own conscience? I wondered. Or was he too another wanderer like me, looking for the life missing beneath his skin, and looking for it even among strangers? After all, he came to me. That too was true.

Perhaps Gilmesh wasn't the cure, I thought. He was only my own reflection in the mirror of life. I got out from the bed and went towards the open window. The cold air felt fresh. I looked out to the street below. A few cars made their way through the light screen of mist that was descending upon the earth. Except for the streetlight and the yellow foglights from the cars, everything else was dark. "So where is the glow for the heart?" I wondered looking at the glow in the windowpane made by the reflection of the streetlight. I saw my own vague image next to the glow in the glass of the pane. With all the other lights of the nearby houses switched off, the glow shone even brighter and stronger now. It was no more an evening. It was night.

□

The Ruins

Manoj Kumar Goswami

Slowly, like a house made of playing cards, the enormous building breaks down.

Its sky-kissing arrogance gets scattered in the dust in a single moment. Sand and dust and noise fill up every side. A deadly cyclone shatters the neat and clean New York. Innumerable people run helter-skelter, in desperation. Anadi came near the college to meet Oli. Today is Wednesday. Oli has a class at 10 O'clock. She has been working very hard for her thesis, and has been equally busy with the college and teaching. He notices—Oli has become a bit slim.

She looks even more beautiful because of that. She is wearing a sky-blue sari; a coloured bindi decorates her forehead. A brand new ring, with a shining red coral inset, is in a finger of her right hand. Even the minutest changes in Oli cannot escape Anadi's eyes. Generally her lips remain bare; today a touch of lipstick is visible though. "I forbade you from meeting me near the college," Oli says it a little irritately.

Anadi walks on the footpath by her side. Silently. He says in his mind, "I have gone mad just to have a look at you, Oli. I did not have a wink the whole night.

I want to inhale the fragrance of your hair, I want to feel the touch of your fingers on my chest." And then he says, "America has broken into pieces. Everything has been shattered, Oli."

Oli gazes at him with a puzzled look— "How does it matter to you? I hope your business is going well!"

In a remote corner of the city, Anadi has a bookstore. Not doing well. People have lost the habit of reading. The ones who are his acquaintances borrow books and magazines and do not bother to return. Just going on. Says Anadi, "War has broken out; all over the

world, business etc. will face even harder days ahead."

Oli stands a little away from the college-gate. "You should not come any further. It looks odd in front of my students."

"But I had to meet you Oli. It's very urgent." Anadi begs of her in total desperation. Minute sign of repulsion traverses Oli's pink lips. Anadi appears to be a total loser. He is no longer a match for her. Nonchalantly she asks, "Why?"

"Everything has collapsed. Only emptiness prevails. Haven't you seen the terrific uncertainty everywhere? Can't we think anything afresh now? I've to talk a lot of things with you."

"All those are things of the past, Anadi. Forget everything." Oli says unforgiving. "Concentrate on your business. Please don't spoil yourself."

"But have you noticed New York?" asks Anadi. He is confused with everything subjective, objective. How does everything get shattered like a sand-house?

Who is the attacker? What is his motive? Does anybody understand? He suffocates in agony.

Oli does not respond. She walks away silently towards her college. The bell rings to announce the end of a class. He knows, Oli is no longer his. He has gone far away. There is talk of her marriage with a lecturer colleague.

Anadi hears the sound of catastrophe within his heart. He hears the roar of the end of this world. He envisions ruins, broken structures. Dumbstruck, he views all these in the many rows of televisions at Jain Brothers.

Scene 2

Room No.504. Additional SP HQ and City—both are seated in a hotel room.

The third person present in the room is the hotel manager Lahiri. He is standing there in the pose of a devotee. The fourth peg has just started.

Lahiri is going out again and again to bring cashew, salad and tandoori chicken.

Actually his peg is ready at the verandah. He drinks his peg under the pretext of going out to bring something.

The discussion is centered on America. Not America exactly, but rather the American security system. Quite serious discussion.

"In America, credit card is the identification mark. If you don't have a credit card, then you can't be an American citizen. You can trace out anyone following the trail of his credit card. You can get there his name, address, and telephone no.— everything. It may take a little while, but the culprit will be caught", Additional S.P. (City) Mazumdar said. Last year he went to Boston for two months for undergoing training. Now his knowledge of America is a bit more than necessary.

"Security camera is there at every nook and corner. Somebody is definitely watching you," Mazumdar throws a handful of cashew in his mouth and says in a tired tone.

He is sitting reclining on a pillow on the soft double bed. His shoes are taken off; smell of sweat is emanating from his socks. The smell hits Lahiri every time he bows his head to appreciate Mazumdar's words.

"Then why was DGP Sir so angry with us?" Says Additional S.P. Nath in an obviously frustrated tone. He is sitting in chair, with one of his legs crossed over the other. His complete reflection is there on the mirror in his front. Nath is looking at himself with a glass in his hand.

That means? Not being able to establish the link between the American security systems with the DGP's anger, both Mazumdar and Lahiri look at Nath.

"Why didn't DGP Sir think about America the other day, when he scolded us left and right in connection with the bomb blast at Paltan Bazaar?" says Nath looking at his reflection in the mirror. He is highly disappointed. One of his hands is hanging from the chair's armrest. "We don't even have a van for Patrolling; we are still managing with the old 303 rifles. Both officers and constables have to work for sixteen hours a day. One cannot even manage for twelve days with the monthly salary. But in America? Everywhere electronic security system, radar maintains surveillance of the sky, and as you rightly said, one can know about the past, present and future of a criminal from his credit card alone.

"And yet, shattering all these security measures, they have broken down the World Trade Center, there was attack in Pentagon. CIA, FBI, Interpol—all failed....But you see, nobody is blaming them. And look what happens there?"

"You are right" Mazumdar can realize Nath's agony. "DGP Sir should not have said like that. Just a single bomb blasted. Somebody threw a grenade from motorcycles from among the thousands of people of the busy city evening; two civilians got killed. Nothing spectacular

has happened in this age of global terrorism. Just for that the DGP should not have rebuked us like that in front of the junior officers. Do we alone collect bribe from the trucks? Does the share of goonda-tax from the coal business come to us alone? No, it is not." Mazumdar shakes his head in disagreement. "This is not fair. To be frank, DGP has not seen the world. How many times has he gone beyond Siliguri?" "No it is really a very despicable thing," Manager Lahiri too protests.

"It is the era of global terrorism Sir. We can afford two-three deaths here also," Lahiri consoles in his own language.

Nath does not say anything. The sixth peg is just finished. Lahiri puts another peg. Ferocious police officer Dinabandhu Nath is sitting like a statue in the chair. His gaze is still fixed on the mirror: he is looking at himself. The DGP should not have insulted like this. His heart is roasted with grief and humiliation. After so much effort, he has got his posting in the city. How many more service years are left? Now only he started getting a few bucks. Nowadays he is invited to even some social functions. Slowly he has achieved a sort of social status. And that day, without a thought about it, in front of everyone, DGP...Nath notices in the mirror, a few drops of tear appearing. Nath is a very emotional man.

Scene 3

Nitya said, around the Christmas he would get leave. Both Mr. and Mrs. Barua should go to America at that time. There wont be any problem for visa.

But suddenly what has happened? Nitya works with a multinational company at Boston. He is a software engineer.

He is the only source of his parent's hope and pride; he is their past, present and future—everything. Barua has passed about three years of his retired life. He had a strong desire to visit America once in his lifetime. His whole life went between office and home. Even visa forms were collected. At that moment, everything has gone wrong now. It is the time of uncertainty. Mr. and Mrs. Barua cannot get sleep at night, due to worry and tension. Nitya rang up everywhere there was chaos. Many companies started laying off in quick succession. Shares are having free fall. With the collapse of the World Trade Center, the American economy has collapsed too.

Wall street has reopened, but one cannot look at the market. Many Indians working there have returned to India. Many lost their

jobs. Nitya too is packing his suitcase to come back. With the income from house rent and the pension, Mr. and Mrs. Barua will be able to survive comfortably. But what will happen to Nitya; even after his return to India, what will he do under such circumstances? Deep at night, both wake up from sleep and sit in the balcony. Their worries won't let them sleep. There was this dream of seeing America; perhaps that will never be fulfilled now. After finishing the house at Guwahati and shifting to it, Barua started getting the above two floors constructed, Nitya too sent some money for this; that work too has come to a standstill. But will he be able to settle here once he leaves America?

Scene 4

It is noon. Executive engineer of PWD, Mahanta has just settled down in his office. A few visitors are walking outside. Mahanta rings the bell to call the peon

"Hey, listen! don't allow anybody inside." Mahanta lights a cigarette. He appears a bit relaxed. Deputy secretary Chitra Neog is his classmate. He dials Neog's phone number.

Mahanta: Neog, did you watch TV?

Neog: Yeah.

Mahanta: Wow, what a surprise. Such a powerful, huge building got totally destroyed.

Neog: Yeah. It seems so surprising. How could it happen?

Mahanta: The aeroplane hit very calculatedly at the two-thirds height of the structure. And don't forget, there was about 90,000 litres of fuel in the plane. This generated a temperature of about 1800 degrees, when it struck the building.

Neog: And everything melted away at that high temperature.

Mahanta: Exactly. The structure was erected, not on iron, but on steel frame. Still, it is not a joke to withstand 1800 degree centigrade. The plane itself worked as a huge explosive. Mind you, if the plane had not hit at the crucial two-thirds height, the structure would not have collapsed this way.

Neog: That's the reason there was a gap of about half an hour between the collision and the collapse.

Mahanta: That is natural. The building collapsed only after the steel frame and support—everything melted away like butter.

Neog: Still it appears surprising. A structure like the World Trade Center collapsed.

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Mahanta: By the way, Should we meet commissioner Sir today? Lot of controversy is there with regard to the Ronganoi Bridge. The newspapers too have written whatever they like.

Neog: Yesterday Sir asked me too. According to him, cracks should not have developed within just two months. The CM is thinking of an inquiry, he told.

Mahanta: Will it create big trouble?

Neog: You do the following. Today is the right time. You meet the Commissioner. But please don't mention my name. Discuss the collapse of the World Trade Center, and in between, raise the issue of the bridge. Something like....This happens everywhere. Such an enormous structure shattered into dust. Why can't there even be a small crack in our bridge?

Mahanta: You are right. Believe me, this morning I was thinking of telling something very similar to what you've told just now. The issue of the bridge in between talks of America. The time is fine. Shall I rather go tonight to Commissioner Sir's home?

Scene 5

"My God!" says Benu Kalita with his eyes glued to the TV screen—"Dangerous! The World Trade Center has collapsed. Impossible!"

Senior minister Kalita has just returned in his room after a couple of meeting in a small town. His secretary kept the TV on. Mr. Goswami, deputy to Kalita, has already been waiting for the minister. Along with the minister, three other people enter the room.

"Really very horrifying scene!" All of them nodded in agreement. For a few minutes everybody silently watched the TV news with tensed face. Droplets of sweat are visible on a few foreheads. The switching off of the AC as well may cause that. The minister has respiratory problems; the doctor prohibited the use of AC.

"Sir, CM Sir has already talked with the DGP regarding security," says the secretary. "He also talked about improving your security arrangement a bit. This is not the best of times."

Benu Kalita pays no attention to any of these things. He watches the scene of destruction in the TV. "It takes me back to six years from now." Kalita speaks out like soliloquy—"I was an MP then. Went to the USA as part of a parliamentary team. Watched the famous New York skyline from the Statue of Liberty in the middle of the sea. Towards the very left, the twin towers of the World Trade Center were

standing. As if they had been guarding New York. That structure was twice as tall as the Empire State Building."

Everybody attentively listens to minister Kalita, and nods.

"Today, like in a stroke of magic, the World Trade Center has disappeared from the heart of New York. Something unimaginable." Benu Kalita says to the audience. "Suppose, a tallest building here suddenly disappears. Say the Harlalka building. Though in comparison to the World Trade Center, Harlalka building is just a kid...."

"Really something terrific happened." Goswamy expresses his worry.

"World politics will change now," says Kalita gravely, "but we are in advantage now. The Congress will no longer dare to progress much with the minorities. If election is held within the next six months, our party will definitely form government. You now speak in terms of before and after September 11."

The phone rings. The secretary receives the call. "CM Sir's call." he announces.

Benu Kalita becomes busy talking to the CM on phone; perhaps about America.

Someone reduces the volume of the TV to avoid any difficulty in the conversation. Everyone is dumbfounded viewing the silent, catastrophic scenes in the TV.

Scene 6

"Mitra-da, did you watch how it broke down?" Anadi shouts from the gate.

"No, but heard of course! In the radio."

Anadi totally forgets that Mitra-da does not have a TV. He listens, with eager ears, to a very old radio. He is perhaps one of the last communists in the world. Often he is found seated among a few haphazard heaps of books and magazines. He wears a pair of thick-framed spectacles, and has utter lack of care for his attire—it could be anything for a pair of pajama to a towel. Practically, the office room is his world. Mitra belongs to the rarest species on the face of the earth.

"Anadi, please join me for a cup of black-tea." Mitra tries to arrange the books a bit. The radio is incessantly turned on: perhaps voice of America.

Mitra-da is a bachelor, he teaches history at the local high school.

"Mitra-da, you seem to be pretty jolly today!"

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"Yeah, the Americans have finally learnt a lesson." Mitra went to the corner to light the stove for the cup of black tea. "It's been a long cherished dream: capitalist America go down. We've been shouting slogans since our childhood—Down with Pentagon. After a long wait, a dream finally came true!" With a smile on his face, Mitra-da puts the kettle on the stove.

The thin flame of the stove falls on his lean body. Mitra-da's room is situated amidst the many encroaching shops. Harlalka's huge building is visible through the window. Somewhere nearby, Hindi songs are playing a loudspeaker, and one side of a coloured Coca-Cola hoarding is framed in the view from the window.

"Has the World Trade Center really collapsed? Pentagon is destroyed too?" Mitra's tone is saturated with an excited disbelief. "Tell me, what all the things are being shown in the TV? The Americans must be really scared, isn't it?"

Mechanically, Anadi narrates the slides shown in the TV. Mitra's face lightens up. Terrific downfall of the World Trade Center. Death of employees at the Pentagon, while at work. Crushed New York. The Americans running away helter-skelter.

"Won't anything break down here too, Mitra-da?" Anadi suddenly stops to ask.

Mitra is absent-minded; with the glass of tea in hand, he is gazing outward through the window. His eyes are dreamy with some distant dream. The radio is playing. So monotonous has his life been, for so long. Party office, school, and home. Sometime, in the rendezvous, the talk of the revolution of the yore, the meaning of which is gradually becoming blurred to himself, comes up. Mitra came to the world to wipe out its pains; today he himself is about to slip down through the pass of the mountain of pain and agony. All his personal grieves survive within him like his pets. But those trifles cannot deter him amidst the agony of the failure of his political life. Party has always been more important than his life.

"Won't anything happen here, Mitra-da? Will everything remain the same?"

Anadi repeats.

"Definitely it will, Anadi," as if Mitra had just woken up from his dream.

"You will see, one day everything will break down. Suddenly, from an unknown land, an aeroplane will silently appear. People will stand still at the suddenness of its appearance. None will be able to resist that struggle. One after another, all buildings and minarets will come

down. Will come down that Coca-Cola hoarding too. Strong typhoon will make everybody disoriented. This is the eventual consequence of Imperialism and Capitalism."

Mitra had been confused, frustrated after the fall of the Soviet Union. Today, for the first time, he has become cheerful again. "Just wait and watch, Anadi, everything will be destroyed."

"Here as well?" Anadi repeats in disbelief.

"Yeah, here too," contentedly, Mitra sips at the black tea, "just wait for the time to come...just wait."

Last Scene

But nothing falls down. Everything is static, immobile. During the dusty evenings, Anadi sees—the constant and age-old city skyline. Harlalka's huge mansion stands like a pre-historic demon. Dust and smoke hang in the static air.

Slowly, the shadow of the evening becomes longer. One can almost imagine a huge aeroplane gradually coming nearer, and its dark shadow engulfing the whole city.

Danger is approaching fast; for Harlalka's mansion. These indifferent people will shortly start running, encircled in the fear of death. But in reality, nothing happens. Unlike the collapse of that huge building, the arrogance of his beloved does not collapse. The same politics, identical society, the very same houses and buildings, the people—all stand like constants. Far way in the America, a city may be shaken in a catastrophe, but here, both time and people stand still like discoloured old paintings. Gradually, the evening shadow devours the city, lifeless people on the streets, dull light-bulbs glow in the shops and markets, and at a distance from all this, Harlalka's mansion stands with its arrogant height. Anadi's fantasy ends. Yeah, it is no shadow of any attacker's aeroplane. This city is still intact. Only impenetrable darkness has started settling in his heart.

Translated from Assamese by Abani Barua



The Man Who Made Our Ravana

Ramesh Chandra Shah

Although his real name was Qadir miyan, everyone called him Chichandey. No one in Tikuriya Mohalla ever dreamed that he might have another name. Chichandey is a long, green, glistening vegetable. If you flattened out a marrow with a carpenter's plane and then stretched it like rubber, you'd have a chichandey.

When or how this naming ceremony took place, who drew the parallel between the vegetable called chichandey and Qadir miyan's personality, is a matter of research and quite beyond me. As far as this vegetable is concerned, I know nothing of its taste, nor do I wish to find out. Somehow I have always believed that this is one of the lowest and most unworthy of eatables in the vegetable world. I have heard that unlike a marrow, it has a glisten like wet soap and slips through your finger when it's cut. Its form and colour are so uninviting that, by the evening, it becomes difficult to sell it for even half the price of a marrow. I am telling you these details as an 'insider', because we have our own vegetable business, and I am an eye witness to the sorry state of chichandey.

But somehow I feel that if this unfortunate vegetable had not been named chichandey, it would not have been in this sorry state. If like its cousin the marrow, it had a name like arrow or garrow, people would have eaten it with relish in spite of its glisten and its white stripes. Chichandey sounds like the smells of andey (eggs) and other unsavoury things.

So we lived in Tikuriya Mohalla and so did Chichandey, that is Qadir Miyan. If you inspected Tikuriya Mohalla from the back, you would find a piece of sacking hanging from every door. In the whole market, which is half a mile long and on an average about 10 feet wide, and which is made up of a total of nine mohallas joined together, you

would find pieces of sacking hanging here and there. But you would not find such a long row of eighteen sack curtains all hanging together. The reason for this is that the Barber bazaar right behind our Tikuriya Mohalla consists only of shops, and the shopkeepers of these shops live in these sack-houses. In other Mohallas you see chiks (bamboo curtains) not sacking. I am sure you understand the difference between bamboo curtains and sacking. If you cut hair, mount leather, or skin animals, then you must hang sacking at your door. But if you own a 'Passing Show' or a Wills cigarette agency, then of course the house built above the shop is your own and there will be chiks hanging at its windows and doors. Of course you could also hang a chik at the door which leads into the little lane, but there it could get dirty and there is no difference between the colour of the dirt road and the colour of sacking. And then what is the use of fastening a chik into the pigeon hole that leads to the narrow lane. If the door faces the bazaar, if there is something to see, then there is some use to a chik.

So our Qadir miyan lived perhaps behind one of those pieces of sack. I say 'perhaps' because although our house was next to his shop, that shop that is the house, belonged to someone else and it did not have sacking behind it. It is also possible that Mr. Chichandey and his six year old daughter Sophia, lived in the shop, and lived in such a way that they did not need even the sack curtain.

And really, all the sounds that were connected to Qadir miyan and that echo in my ears even today, all came from within the shop, and came from, five in the morning till eleven or twelve at night. That is, the shop never shut down. And it is also possible that the shop was really a house.

"Sophia! Ay Sophia! Where in hell has she disappeared. Rascal! She dies if she has to sit in the shop for two minutes. I'll beat her to a mince."

"Beta Sophi! Come eat your food. Arre, my little queen is angry? Now Abba is doomed. Now it's all over for Abba. Will my little queen beat her Abba? Who will eat this delicious gulab jamun? And who will eat this sweet Rabri? My darling daughter will eat it. My daughter will eat hot gulab jamuns. Yes—lo and behold, she is laughing, laughing...."

And really the houses nearby would hear sound of Sophiya laughing loudly, happily. And then it was inevitable that for a long time we would hear Qadir miyan's loud echoing, neighing, laughter.

Now perhaps you would be eager to know what kind of shop our Qadir miyan had. As you ask this question the mohalla sways before my eyes. Cramped between Bhairavnath's temple and our Nepali

house, stood a two-storied match box of a house, of which the lower storey—about three hands high—constituted Qadir miyan's shop. Five or six ropes hanging from it's roof and swinging from these ropes are colourful, red, green, white, yellow caps and in the boxes below, a joyful profusion of cheap rings.

Yes, Qadir miyan made caps. Except for those rare times when he was busy with his Sophiya-monologues, or when he would put on his churidar pyjamas and his green kurta, carefully starched, and would walk rapidly up and down the mohalla, with his hands folded behind his back, giving his comments and opinions, his eyes filled with curiosity observing the activities of all those around. The rest of the time he would be seen sewing his topis, his sewing machine rarely sat quiet. It would get it's rest only when his throat-machine started cranking. It was not as if Qadir miyan did not know how to make things other than those caps. Our elders tell us that there was a time when our area was famous for it's theater, and every year there would be sixty or seventy plays and the responsibility for making the dresses for the plays was that of Qadir miyan alone. It was Qadir miyan's misfortune, indeed the misfortune of our whole area, that in 1931, the brother-in-law of the Christian priest in charge of the leprosy colony, started a cinema called 'Darbar' in our area, and before our very eyes, our 50 year old theater shut it's doors and Qadir miyan gradually lost his employment. His unemployment was twofold, because not only did he sew the costumes but also played minor parts. Once Qadir miyan himself told me that in the play called *Banasur*, he himself had played the leading role of *Banasur*, the demon king. Yes, I remember, that was when the film *Banasur* was playing and the school had arranged for us to see it, and after I had told him the story of the film, he had cursed the mothers and sisters of the film people, and had told me of his past, and neither at that time did I think it was an exaggeration, nor do I think so now, after all these years. My elder brother even says that if Qadir miyan had entered the films he would have left the famous actor Chandramohan far behind.

I remember that if a man from our mohalla was unsuccessful in teasing Qadir miyan at his first attempt, his second attempt would go something like this, "Yaar, Chichandey, shall we go to the 'Darbar', Laila-Majnu is playing today."

"Laila-Majnu is—" Chichandey would fly off the handle.

"Arre, this is my treat friend. It won't empty your pocket. Did you know it has a dance by your favourite Suraiyya and songs by Saigal." Qadir miyan would glare at his tormentor in pretended aston-

ishment, and cursing Suraiyya and Saigal in the same loud voice would walk on. Everybody knew that in spite of the anger he displayed by day, he would sneak in to the second show at night and see his favourite films. If anyone from the mohalla saw him and asked him the next day—“Why Chichandey! Did you enjoy yourself?” He would retort in a stung tone — “You must have seen your own father at the theatre. Me and films! Misfortune on your head.”

We were the first in the mohalla to find out about Qadir miyan's secret night visits. Whenever we heard Sophiya sobbing far into the night, we understood that Abba has gone to see a film. The next morning and afternoon we would not hear Qadir miyan's shouting-screaming voice at all.

The biggest shop in the mohalla—the man it belonged to was from our community. But we had no interaction at all with him. That whole family was well-known for it's rude and violent ways and was named Phatphatuva (Motorbike). For about one-third of a century Qadir miyan had bought his daily provisions from this shop. He had a monthly account. Everything one might need was available at this shop.

Everyone knows that people run up accounts with provision stores, but perhaps you did not know that tailors too give credit. I told you that Qadir miyan made caps. Caps for summer, caps for winter, white, red, blue, all kinds of caps. And, every male head, not only in our mohalla but in the whole city, was covered by Qadir miyan. In those times it was considered unmannerly to have an uncovered head. It was a year-round employment and also a seasonal one. I remember once his shop was decked with white caps for several months. It was the first election of Independent India and it was the Congress party which stormed the fort at Hanumana. Then gradually the shop became tri-coloured. But then all of a sudden red came to dominate all the other colours, and in truth that year it was the socialist candidate who won from our area. The next time, I was home from Lucknow for the holidays and I noticed, much to my surprise, that Qadir miyan's shop is totally saffron. Perhaps, this is what made people, and also Qadir miyan, boldly predict that just see this time the lamp (election symbol of the Jan Sangh) will win, and that is what actually happened.

In spite of his seasonal and perennial business of cap-making Qadir miyan always seemed to be running it at a loss. People used to say that Chichandey has amassed great wealth which he is accumulating for his daughter's wedding. His wife had become dear to Allah long

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ago, and Sophiya alone was his be all and end all. But Qadir miyan's bosom friend Laloo Seth said—and this was my belief also—that Chichandey was a glutton and whatever he earned went into the pit he called his stomach. Money barely came in and it was blown away. He couldn't live without sweetmeats. He would devour half a seer of rabri standing outside the sweetmeat shop. Even in days of hardship — long live credit — he had the same habits. I don't know if he was addicted to liquor or not but I never heard that he had cheated anyone of their money.

During Moharram, Qadir miyan would stop sewing caps and set up a sweetmeat stall. I was very fond of the Panjiri prasad we used to get at the Krishna temple during the festival of Janmashtami, and these Moharram sweets too tasted like that—in fact the sweets made by Qadir miyan were more delicious. The dry fruits that Qadir miyan put into his special sweets were not even dreamed of by the other sweetmeat stall holders, and far surpassed that of the panjiri prasad. What he earned from his sweet stall, only he knew, but as soon as he put up his stall, we children used to swoop down on it, and clean out everything within half an hour, and as he collected our half-annas in one hand and stuffed them in his pocket, he would merrily announce "Show is over, money is gone" and to us he would seem a magician as he quickly folded up his stall and put away his things. The best Taziya of the bazaar was made in our mohalla, and every Dasshera day, nine Ravanans on chariots were led out in a procession, and every year the first and the best Ravan came from our mohalla. There were many nights of effort behind this Ravan, and on the last night, Qadir miyan used to shoo us away and take over himself. And we all believed that the reason for the primacy of our Ravan was hidden in the last skilled touches of that last night. The whole of Hanumana was convinced that Qadir miyan had some special skill, and Qadir miyan himself was well aware of it.

Most probably there had been some minor altercations between Qadir miyan and Phutphutva before. Who would believe that a man who was known for his bad temper, and who was held in contempt by more than half the people in the mohalla, that such a man and a jolly and honest man like Qadir miyan, would not have had any clashes in one-third of a century. But what happened that day could not even have been imagined.

There could be no greater proof of the low reputation of

Phutphutuva that, in spite of his having the biggest shop, apart from Qadir miyan, no one in the mohalla, went anywhere near his store. Apart from his bad temper, it was a topic of common discussion that he fiddled the accounts. In spite of all that there always was a crowd of customers outside his shop. Some of these customers were from other mohallas, but most were from nearby, and even far off, villages who could not have known much about Lala Phutphutuva's peculiarities.

It was a Sunday and I was sitting at my shop. It must have been about twelve or one o'clock. Qadir Miyan could be seen coming from above from Crooked bazaar. Someone teased him from behind—'Chichandey.' Qadir miyan turned round to look and turning his face towards where the sound had come from shouted— "Which cursed one is crying for his father so soon in the day?", and walked ahead smiling. Meanwhile, in the shop in front of mine, Lala Bhikam Singh, weighing arhar dal, intending Qadir Miyan to hear, shouted at me, "Lalla, weigh two Chichandeys, will you." At this Qadir miyan smilingly, gave me a sideways glance, and going towards the Lala, whispered as if fondling him, "What will you do with two, Lala? Why are you asking him. Tell me—my chichanda is ready and at your service. Shall I take it out?," and before Bhikam Singh could answer Qadir miyan went off fluttering his kurta, and laughing loudly. On other days he would not pass our shop without stopping for a few minutes, even if it was only me sitting there. But this day he went straight on. One minute later I heard Qadir miyan's voice—"Quiet, you son of a pumpkin." I have never known whether this daily drama was enjoyed more by Qadir miyan or by the mohalla people. He takes at least three or four turns of the mohalla in the course of sewing his caps. Is it only so that people could tease him and he would have the opportunity to invent yet another swear word? Doesn't he get tired of this daily theatre? If one day, unexpectedly, the mohalla people decide to stop teasing Qadir miyan, what will Qadir miyan do?

Although I call it a theatre, don't imagine that Qadir miyan never really got irritated. If he did not get upset then what would be the point of teasing him? In some moods, his playfulness would get extinguished. Especially if someone he was really angry with called him 'Chichandey', or when he was looking for Sophiya, or when his pockets were completely empty. At such times the baiter would really be tormented.

But that day he seemed to be in quite a good mood, and none of the three reasons given above were present. In those days, once again,

Qadir miyan's shop had become a white cap factory, and every evening, without fail, anyone could see both father and daughter outside Kisna Confectioners, feasting on milk and jalebis.

It had not even been five minutes since he passed me when I heard a commotion and the sound of Qadir miyan screaming. At that time I really was weighing out some chichandey. Immediately, I understood that Chichandey and Phutphutuva have had a serious clash. I got rid of my customer and jumped down from my shop, and saw to my horror that both the Phutphutuva brothers have pounced upon Qadir miyan and are showering him with blows, and Qadir miyan, trying to save himself, is shouting abuses at them. The next moment, I see that Qadir miyan is running towards his shop screaming and one of the Phutphutuva brothers chases him a little way and then turns back. All the shopkeepers of the mohalla are standing in front of their shops watching the show. In front of Surendra's shop four or five people were arguing loudly. I too went near them and listened.

"Did you see two of the bastards attacked him."

"Chichandey abused them first."

"What abuse? He must have called him Phutphutuva, and that's hardly an abuse."

"No. He had gone to buy some sugar. He said Hey Phutphutuva", Then the younger Phutphutuva said "Ay Chichandey watch your tongue' "

"What happened then?"

"Then Chichandey said, 'Your father must be a chichandey.' Just then the elder brother came out from inside and said, 'Just stop dealing with this bastard. Hey you bastard, you owe us two month's accounts, settle it now, immediately' "

"Yes, and then what did Chichandey say?"

"Chichandey screamed loudly for all the mohalla to hear 'See these bastards, yesterdays upstarts, are trying to harass me. Hey Bastard, I have been buying from this shop since your father's time. Have I ever owed you even one paisa, let anyone say I did'."

"He was always such great friends with the elder Phutphutuva"

"Then Chichandey threw the packet of sugar into the shop saying 'To hell with these Phutphutuvass'. With that the elder brother lost control, came out of his shop, grabbed Chichandey by the collar and pushed him so hard that Chichandey fell to the ground. He got up, cursed their mother and got in a slap or two. Then both the brothers attacked Chichandey."

"Did you see? His nose was bleeding."

"So many people were just standing and watching the show? When Phutphutuva pushed him why didn't you intervene?"
 "Why should I? Just to hear them abuse me?"

These were the eye-witness accounts. I later heard that people went one by one and collected near Qadir miyan, and all advised him to lodge an FIR at the near by police station that the Phutphutuva brothers have made it impossible for decent people to live in this mohalla. They must be taught a lesson.

He listened and after hearing everyone's advice, Qadir miyan said to the people, "OK, I will report it. Those among you who saw it happen, please come with me and be my witness."

"Yes, yes, why not-why not," so saying, his well wishers, Suren, Mahen, Bhikamsinh, Tikamsinh, all went off to eat their lunch. Qadir miyan tied up his white caps in a bundle and left, after waiting two hours for them. All day Sophia sobbed alone at home. Quite late at night Qadir miyan returned and waking up Phutphutuva, settled his accounts.

The next day the whole mohalla was astonished to see Qadir miyan's shop was empty, father and daughter were nowhere to be seen. Later we came to know that Ismail Khan Aligarhvala, had given Qadir miyan one room in his big house. Ismail Khan Aligarh was a rich man of our area. He owned the agency for the 'passing show' cigarettes.

After that for weeks he was not seen in our mohalla, and then one day we heard that he had taken his Sophia and left town.

Ismail Sahib said that one of Qadir miyan's relatives have opened a shop for him in Kashipur. But the mohalla people, and especially Laloo seth said that Qadir miyan and Ismail Aligarhwalla could never get along. After that mishap, Qadir miyan did not want to live in the mohalla, nor did he want to be under the obligation of Ismail Khan. So, naturally, he just left town.

God knows what the truth in all this is. All I remember is that at Dusschera that year, our mohalla did not make a Ravan. The procession in our town that year consisted of eight instead of nine Ravans.

Translated from Hindi by Renana Jhabvala



Till Death Do Us Part

Santwana Nigam

Tuk, Tuk, Tuk
Ach-cha-a-a!

It was a voice from a throat rattling with phlegm that responded to Sushma's knocks.

Almost simultaneously there came the sound of approaching wooden sandals, closer and closer, till it ceased just behind the door.

And there he was, standing between the doors thrown wide open, to welcome Sushma. Babuji was in his usual form—the inevitable loin cloth of hand-spun, hand-woven *khaddar* and a self-stitched jacket of the same material, his darksome face covered with stubs of grey hair sticking out like bristles.

"You are incorrigible, Babuji; going again with that unshaven beard," shot the uninhibited Sushma as she made her way in.

"Never mind dear; I hadn't the ghost of an idea you'd drop in like that. I'll have a shave right now."

The next moment Babuji was at it. He took out his badly dented and discoloured aluminium shaving mug from a little hollow in the wall and his looking glass, a bare six-inch piece cracked along its length which he rested against a little block of wood kept for the purpose. Next, he was squatting on the floor busy restoring the edge of his only razor blade, carefully preserved like the last arrow, in the locker, rubbing it briskly up and down against a little piece of glass-sheet. Sushma sat watching him, her eyes twinkling with emotion.

"It must be the last of those partially used blades left by Dadi two years ago or more," she thought to herself.

Sushma was now taking in the rest of the scene. Everything was just the same, more or less, as at the time of her last visit. Right in

the centre of the courtyard stands the papaya tree. The soil around it has been carefully upturned to allow the required nutrition to infiltrate the roots. The papaya tree hosts an Indian bean creeper, and is flanked on the left by a foot-tall green chilly plant. The bean creeper sprawling over the papaya tree is loaded with graceful, white flowers. It is not time for the pods yet. Sushma knows well that the Indian bean, her mother's favourite, was sown by her, while green chillies were Babuji's choice and were planted by him. On the other side of the courtyard there is a none-too-spacious verandah, divided into two halves by a charpoy. This charpoy is never put to its natural use. Its new function is to serve as a partition screen for the verandah.

The door on the right creaks and opens with a funny noise. The funny musical note announces Amma's arrival on the scene. And there she was emerging from her room with slow steps, carrying a modest heap of pots and pans to be rinsed. The sight of utensils to be rinsed reminded Sushma of the hour of the day. It must be past 4 'O' clock, Amma's lunch hour!

Babuji threw an angry look at her and mumbled, "Strange are the ways here! Everywhere else they'd be sitting for their afternoon tea now, but here, it's only lunch hour!"

With studied indifference to the remark, Amma turned to Sushma: "O, Munni, how do you happen to be here, today of all days? Isn't Harish home for the weekend? I thought he was. And how is little Guddo?"

"No, he isn't. He has been held up this Saturday. He would be home next Saturday."

"Good Heavens! Already it wasn't oftener than once a week, I suppose. Now it seems the family doesn't get together even that often. I wonder what you girls are these days. You haven't been married quite eight years yet and have already started living half a world away from each other. It beats me. It beats me quite!"

Babuji who had finished his shave and was carefully wiping the blade, preparing to put his shaving kit away, now felt bold to address his difficult daughter:

"If you had to have a job, you could as well have found one in your husband's town itself. Couldn't you? What's the fun of staying away, and that too in a hostel? It makes no sense."

"You'd better not think of those things, Babuji. It was a decent job that came my way. That decided things. Who would have come away otherwise? I should have been a schoolteacher there, pining amid want and insecurity. Or, just a housewife, perhaps, lost in the kitchen,

buried in daily chores, keeping count of every single penny, day after day, six days a week. And, Sunday? No, no rest on Sunday. The better part of the day spent in clearing the week's deferred drudgery. In the evening, all dressed and powdered, perfumed, with husband and children a ritual visit to a movie theatre—any movie, good, bad, indifferent. On the way back, stopping at the marketplace, eating *chhole bhature* from one of those wheelbarrow eating shops to escape the evening's cooking ordeal. A design for living indeed! Week after week, all these eight years. I was bored to death by this dreadful design. It's somewhat different now. Every Saturday there's some little expectation, some little waiting. That's a lot better. Isn't it?"

"Bored! That's a precious word with you, young folks. Your profound criticism of life. We've never felt bored in life," said Amma, who seemed to be losing her patience.

Sushma smiled as she contemplated the truth of that assertion. In their long married life, they had never once complained of boredom. They were so different from each other—in their ways, in their thought and taste. They belonged to the antipodes, almost. Amma was a music enthusiast, but music put him off. Amma loved literature, Babuji wouldn't go near it. Babuji was fond of chapattis, but chapattis invariably gave her indigestion. Amma was lavish, Babuji was the very definition of frugality. It had its implications, quite serious at times. But boredom? No, boredom never touched either. Their married life was one long story of confrontation, daily, if not hourly, encounters in which no quarter was asked or given. How long indeed, mused Sushma, and went on, must be about half a century, easily. It's eight years to her own marriage already. Eight years!

Yes, it was eight years ago when going through the draft of her wedding card, Babuji had his attention arrested by the date on the card. "What? The 4th of June? The date sounds familiar," he had wondered, and was the next moment recalling the date of his own marriage. "O, Hey!" he had called out for Amma. "Yes, yes, Babuji. Go to Amma and confirm the date and year of your marriage. We might as well celebrate your wedding anniversary along with Munni's marriage." Dada took a dig at him rather facetiously, Babuji's indulgence having emboldened him beyond imagination. And, touched to the quick, Amma had delivered snappishly from her own room: "A very just hour for such a celebration. Not a day too early. Very handsome thought indeed after forty eight years!" she had heaved a deep sigh as she uttered those history-laden words.

Sushma's retrospection was unending, uncontrollable. She recol-

lected how when for a moment only the two of them were left in the room, she had voiced her fears, half-mocking, half-serious, "Heaven help me, Dada! Getting married on the 4th of June, that baleful day! Amma and Babuji were married on that date. A perpetual warfare — that's what life may mean."

Sushma's married life did not turn out to be a regular warfare exactly. But scarcely a year had passed when a great sense of void and emptiness in life invaded them. They no longer meant the same thing to each other. A nameless something seemed to have passed away from their lives, something that made a vast difference. Everything in life was just the same as before, yet life itself was so different, so bleak!

Harish wasn't quite the Prince Charming he had once seemed to be. Then, and now, what a difference! Harish was magnetic then. There was music in his voice, magic in his words. His most casual touch thrilled Sushma and sent such a tingling sensation through her whole body. His presence turned wilderness into paradise. Harish, of course, had the same story to tell.

"You were so different, so wonderfully different, Sushma. And, just to think it was only a year ago! What could have happened?" says he.

The paradise had relapsed into wilderness.

What was the nameless something that had made such a difference, mused Sushma. Distance, perhaps, which ever lends enchantment to the view, she decided.

Proximity had brought a knowing awareness of each other's faults and shortcomings. Little blemishes, scarcely revealed even to a microscopic vision, stood now like big beams before the naked eye.

"Not any compulsions of business, but a consuming contemplation of some such beam in her was holding Harish back this week-end, perhaps" Sushma was thinking.

Sushma's cogitations were snapped by Babuji's bringing her a steaming hot cup of tea which brought her an embarrassing reminder of her lapse. It was she who could have done it.

"You shouldn't have bothered really; I would have made some tea myself," was her abashed response as she took the cup of tea from his hands.

"No bother at all. That's my daily routine. All it meant was adding another cupful of water. That's all," came his reassuring reply.

Sushma did not have to be told that. She was painfully aware that Babuji was cooking his own meals, perfunctory as they were. Amma's

daily routine was so different from that of Babuji that they had to have separate kitchen arrangements.

To every suggestion of Sushma to engage a servant, Babuji had a patent reply, "No, dear; there isn't work enough for a servant. After all, how much does an old man eat? Just a pan to cook in and eat from. Wiping and rinsing hardly takes any time. It's easily done. And then, one must work to eat. A retired man that I am, I can and must do as much. 'They are thieves that without labour eat,' says Vinobaji. How true! I wouldn't be a thief."

Amma's response to similar suggestions has been equally unenthusiastic: "No maid-servant likes to serve in a one-man household. Even if one comes, she wouldn't stay beyond a week."

Almost in a whisper Babuji would confide in Sushma: "No maid-servant is going to stay if you go on nagging all the time."

There was a large grain of truth in the charge, Sushma felt. She had observed from her childhood days how fastidious Amma was. Even the best servant was not good enough for her. That was no small factor in her decision to keep a separate kitchen with all the bother that it meant to her in her old age. Even now, as she sat rinsing those utensils, she seemed to Sushma a picture of the self-same determination.

Behind Babuji's almost fanatic existence on the emulation of Vinobaji and behind Amma's equally fanatic persistence in her self-help resolution, Sushma discerned a more touching story, the story of a hundred and fifty rupees travelling every month from a far-away town to enable them to keep their body and soul together. A big chunk of it, full forty rupees, goes to meet the rent of the house. Apart from their moral excellence, the Gandhian principle of simple living and the self-help resolution were perfect economic wisdom to balance the budget with.

By now Amma had finished her rinsing operation. Wiping her hands with the corner of her sari, she turned to Sushma and took her seat on the charpoy behind Sushma. Babuji, who had also finished his tea, stood and gave a satisfied belch and declared, "I must go and look up good old Guptaji while you two are having your session. I am sure you two will have many things to say to each other," he turned to go.

A visit to Guptaji every afternoon was an unalterable part of Babuji's daily routine. The visit was meant as much to keep the friendship in repair as to keep himself informed of the goings on in the world by scanning the daily paper, which was regularly kept for him in Guptaji's verandah, everyone having done with it by then.

Babuji had no sooner crossed the threshold that Amma lost her

self-restraint and almost burst out, "What was he poisoning your mind with? Servants won't stay because I nag day and night? He said that. Didn't he? Always talking ill of me. He'd be sick if he didn't do that. Can't miss an opportunity to malign me. You've seen for yourself, haven't you?"

"O, leave that story Amma. You should be fairly used to it by now. Tell me how you are? You look pretty off-colour," said Sushma in an attempt to change the topic.

"Would you expect a doddering old woman to be in the pink? I feel my inside is all rotten. Had it not been the care and comfort of the parent's home, I would be dust and ashes by now. Brought up on purest ghee, butter and fruits, all in plentiful supply, I had an iron constitution. But before long nothing was left of that in your father's house. Just a wreck of womanhood. That's what was left of me. And my reward? What you've heard just now!"

"You're impossible Amma, always talking of the comforts of your father's home."

"And why mustn't I? You'll never understand my plight. And how can you? You've just produced one child, and are now sitting pretty, recuperating all your life. I had to do it every year. One after another, eight children, besides two miscarried. No small ordeal for the strongest woman. Four of them didn't survive. They died, and left me dead too, mentally, emotionally, physically. Dead. Believe me, it is this ordeal that wrecked my health. Look at yourself! You have a strenuous job, and a no less strenuous domestic life. It has made but a little dent on you. Why?"

"But times have changed, Amma. In your days it was quite normal to have so many children. Even your younger sister has seven. Hasn't she? Your case wasn't very particular."

"It was particular because I was not up to that strain; my heart was not in it. Every conception was a life and death struggle for me. But that was nothing to others. No one ever cared a button for it. Women are meant to be wretched, perhaps."

Sushma's centre of vision had now shifted elsewhere, to a neighbour's roof, where a young girl was collecting and arranging the day's washings spread out to dry. She was barely out of her teens. From her deep vermilion-filled parting and thick, red bridal bangles, Sushma concluded that the girl must be newly married.

Noticing Sushma's curiosity, Amma remarked, "That's our neighbour's daughter-in-law. She was recently married. She has come

with her husband. They snatch a few moments some times and escape to the roof for their little love play. It is interesting."

She became thoughtful. She broke the silence herself. "Does marriage really mean a marriage of minds, of hearts? Or, is it simply a physical relationship with nothing reciprocal about it? I've always wondered. But at the sight of couples like this and others, the question becomes insistent. What do you think?"

"At least there is an endeavour towards a fuller union," replied Sushma to evade rather than prolong the discussion as there was something infectious about the mood behind those questions, at least for her.

"Yes, I have been going through those motions in my life. So have you been in yours. But to what end?"

"Has Dada written to you recently? He hasn't been writing to me of late," asked Sushma, still trying to change the direction of the discussion.

"He has. Only last week I had a letter from him. He is planning to leave the country the moment he gets a job he is looking for abroad." A film of mist covered her eyes as she gave out that information. Then, somewhat abruptly, looking into Sushma's eyes, she inquired, "Why hasn't Harish come for the week-end? You haven't quarrelled, the two of you. Have you?"

"Oh no, you're worrying yourself to death for nothing, Amma. He must have been held up for one reason or the other."

"Well, let's hope so. Somehow your staying away from him doesn't appeal to me. It's not my cup of tea, I must say."

An amused smile ran across Sushma's face. "Amma is just a creature of her times, conditioned by received opinion. The very idea of husband and wife staying apart seems to her so ominous, so calamitous. Life as one knows it, has only problems; there are no solutions; if there are solutions, they are just unacceptable. No exit!" contemplated Sushma as she tried to understand the fears voiced by Amma.

It was nearly dark now. So Amma rose and switched the light on. Sushma too had moved into the room. A miserable light from a low-power bulb falling on the damp walls of the room made it look rather dull and drab. Here, this room, was all that Amma had. A corner of the room was dedicated to her gods, displaying the pictures of her favourite gods and articles of daily worship, flowers, incense, a block of sandalwood and the like. Another corner served her as a kitchen and pantry. In the third corner was her bed. This was her actual living

space. There was a fourth corner, which was untenanted, never to be occupied. Here stood a door that was never opened.

On the other side of the door, there was another room, with its only inmate, a bed, a bookshelf, the prominent contents of which were *Thoughts of Vinoba*, *Sarvodaya Bulletins*, the *Mahabharata* and an *Anthology of Hymns*. On the wall, there was a large-size calendar with a portrait of Gandhiji in its centre. On one side of this room were kept, each in its own place, a few essential belongings, such as a stove, a few utensils, a pair each of rubber shoes and wooden sandals. From wall to wall stretched a clothesline on which were spread out a few dresses, all made of the purest khadi, some washed, some unwashed.

Here was the picture of the forty-eight year-long association, or was it isolation? Two incarnations of lonesomeness in daily confrontation, crossing, colliding, collapsing, coexisting, living apart under the same roof. A heart-rending spectacle for Sushma. And here, right in front of her, was not the spectacle but one of the two embodiments of lonesomeness—Amma, her face furrowed with wrinkles, deep vermillion line along the parting of her grey head, and her lustreless eyes telling their silent story of despair and disillusionment, of life wasted. It was too much for Sushma. She felt choked.

"I must take your leave Amma. It's quite dark already." As she uttered those words, Sushma took out a few currency notes from her purse and with trembling hands offered them to Amma, saying, "Amma, please, keep these. Half of it is for Babuji. Do get something nice for yourself. I got some of my arrears of pay today, and so have more than I need."

"Don't be silly. What do I need money for? Keep them with you," snapped Amma, and thrust the currency notes into Sushma's purse. Sushma knew there could be no argument with Amma. But there was a unique expression playing on Amma's face, an expression of softness; sadness and joy, all rolled in one.

Sushma had collected her things and was already on her way out when Amma, who had followed her up to the outer door to see her off, stopped her and began, "Look Sushma, next time you come, bring some nice mangoes for your Babuji. You know he loves mangoes. The mango season is nearly over, and he hasn't had a mango yet. And don't come alone. Bring little Guddo along." As Sushma was about to leave, Amma added, "It's quite late now. It's not nice walking alone to the bus-stand at this hour. Take your Babuji along. You are sure to find him in Guptaji's verandah."

Just the third house was Guptaji's. As though he had been only

waiting for Sushma, Babuji got up the moment he saw her approaching. With great alacrity, he folded his reading glasses, pressed them into the case and tucked it away into his pocket like a stolen article, with an obvious guilty look. The fact was that Babuji was mortally scared of Sushma and did not wish her to notice his spectacles as one of its sides had given way and a piece of woollen string was being used in its place. He was sure that Sushma would make some stinging remark if she noticed his improvisation.

"I have been waiting for you all this while. You seem to have had a prolonged session with your mother. What was the subject of your discussion?"

"No subject in particular. All sorts of things. Our usual gossip, you know."

They had already reached the bus-stop just at the turn of the street. There was no sign of the bus. They stood waiting for it, talking aimlessly. Then Babuji, as if seizing a long-awaited opportunity, addressed Sushma with considerable solicitude: "I have noticed something you don't know perhaps. One does not get the appetising smell of good ghee from your mother's room these days. She has taken to Dalda, perhaps. You know what I mean?"

He was silent for a few moments. Then clearing his throat, he added, "Try to get a *pao* or so of good ghee for your Amma the next time you come."

Her throat, too choked to say anything, Sushma took out those currency notes again, but almost instinctively put them back. Instead, she took out fifteen paise, which she now held in her hand, the price of her bus ticket. The bus had already negotiated the bend and was seen fast approaching.

Translated from Hindi by R L Nigam

College¹

Vinod Kumar Shukla

My friend and I were in the final year of college. My younger brother was in the first year. I spent my spare time wandering through the market-place. Making the rounds of shops had become a habit; I got a lot of pleasure out of it. Hockey, kho-kho [2], chess, soccer and kabbadi were on at the college in the evenings. But the game I liked even more than kho-kho was to select a shopper from the crowd in front of me and follow him.

The main road was always thronged. Some people would cross the road from my side. Other people, in knots of two or three would cross over from the other side. I enjoyed watching this to and fro more than a kabbadi² match. To see a cow in the market forcing its way through unsuspecting vegetable sellers squatting on the ground or on low stone platforms was a great spectacle. Once in a while two bicycles collided. At other times a bag came open and flour spilled on to the road. All sorts of events could transpire. I never went to a college tournament. I didn't even bother with daily newspapers, although many of my friends were regular visitors to the reading room of the Gandhi library. Roaming through the bazaar was my favourite pastime hands down.

Our household shopped for vegetables once every three days. We restocked on salt, lentils, rice, coriander and chilies once a month. It was pleasanter to observe other people buying goods than to make purchases oneself; it cost less money to watch. I was impressed easily by buyers. I could pick out wealthy people easily and those with long

1. "Mahavidyalaya" by Vinod Kumar Shukla, (Adhar Prakashan, Panchkoola, 1996), 90-91

2. Kabbadi is played with two teams each of which tries to cross over into the territory of the other without getting tagged. A line divides the two territories.

shopping lists. Walking behind such people was to see the bazaar in the right way. I liked returning home without having spent my own money. It was liberating. [Such freedom and no compulsion.]

A few pedestrians on the main road were just passing through. Perhaps they did not have cash to buy what they needed or else not enough cash yet. They would buy when they had accumulated more. A beggar became a buyer once he received alms. A debtor became a buyer once he received credit. A thief became a buyer once he stole. I understood that there was no escape from the bazaar unless one counted dying cold and hungry an escape. This cold fact did not diminish my affection for the bazaar. I would return home when the shops closed, happy that no one had cheated me. If my father wanted paan I would cycle back to the bazaar for cheaper paan instead of buying from Gange Guru in the neighbourhood. I gave no thought to how late it was. It never happened that I overpaid a shopkeeper. It never happened that a shopkeeper gave me back extra change. (Life went on in an orderly manner. Because we had mango trees in our region there were mangoes. Some things could be got from other regions. Crates of apples, pineapples and lychees were shipped to our market and sold from crate to hand. There was a lot of buying of gold and silver. It was joy that someone could set out from home with lady's-fingers in mind and return with lady's-fingers in his shopping bag. If arhar lentils were unavailable he might accept mung beans instead.)

My friend says that my nose was handsome and my voice not so grating when I was in the first year. By the time I graduated my voice became harsh and my nostrils flared out. If I had failed to graduate I would have turned into someone fiercer still. We worried a lot about failing the graduation exams. The college was surrounded by high walls on all four sides, beyond which lay ponds. An old fort had been redesigned as a college. The main door was made of wooden planks fastened by iron bands. A fully loaded truck could pass under the main door with ample clearance. I had never known this door to be shut.

The windows of many classrooms in the college opened to the ponds. We were able to lean down from the windows to scoop water in our hands the way passengers do from boats. Four first-year classrooms and two fourth-year classrooms lay just above water level. The students who chewed paan or tobacco chose seats by windows. On days teachers were absent students would dangle their legs over the window ledge and pee into the water.

The two third-year classrooms were situated at some distance from one another. A large temple had been built in the space between

the two classrooms. The temple was set so far back it was pitch dark inside. There were also a few rooms for rent. Some of the tenants had been living in these rooms for thirty or forty years. An old tenant lived with his family in three narrow rooms between the postgraduate classrooms. He was a clerk in the local court. All efforts to evict him had failed. His son was my classmate. Students attended lectures in rooms where soldiers had lodged. A bicycle rack stood where horses used to be stabled.

Three pipal³ trees grew together on a mound. The walls in the rooms adjacent to the mound swelled in faint jagged lines along pipal tree rootlets. Devotees had planted iron staves under the pipal trees and attached saffron pennants to the top. Rubble from old statues lay in a heap at the base of the staves. Most of the teachers and the principal of the college lived in this area. Khaprail⁴ selling tea, snacks and paan were crammed against the main door to the college. They fought for inches of space ready to push through right onto the college grounds.

During the entire rainy season my first year I felt classes were being held on a boat. While the history lecture was in progress my thoughts strayed to the floor. I was convinced there was a secret basement below. I had noticed that when my sandals struck the floor it made a hollow sound. Lines of ants issued from cracks where the stones joined. Later, the management had the cracks filled up with cement.

Water never came through the windows even when it rained for days. Frogs, on the other hand, hopped freely into the classroom as the water level rose. When it was absolutely quiet herons would settle on the window ledge, their faces to the water. The moment someone entered the room they flew away in a rush.

The smell of fish hung over the classrooms. The sweeper assigned to the rooms would sweep the floors first, then lean out of the window to snag garlands, banana leaves, coconut shells, matchsticks. Sometimes he found pencils and rulers floating on the water. "He is sweeping the pond now," I would say. Once people near the temple chased the sweeper away⁵. He was irritated; the coconuts and garland heaps in the water came from the temple. He swore at the priest under his breath. When his son contracted small-pox it was I who had to perform the healing puja⁶ for him in place of the priest.

3. *Ficus religiosa*

4. Stalls, roofed with tiles

5. The worshippers probably objected to a person of low caste crossing their path.

6. Religious service, worship

I needed a waiver from paying tuition. I took my papers to the college principal. As he was getting ready to sign the forms a large piece of plaster fell to the floor. A pipal root thick as a finger swung out from the wall. The principal was startled. He called in his typist and pointed to the dangling root. When the typist tugged at it plaster flew from the wall all the way to the corner. After the root snapped off at the corner the principal sat down at his desk and signed the waiver.

I liked commerce and economics best of all. The economics professor dressed drably in white shirts and polyester pants. He walked with a marked stoop. If he picked up something off the floor as he shuffled by no one would notice. He had long, coarse fingers. On weekends he would clean his apartment himself instead of hiring a boy. He took an entire day off once to re-paint his bicycle. We fell into a discussion on the value of saving. He was of the view that commerce depended on growth in the number of consumers but savings depended on consumers buying as little as possible. I understood that if consumers reduced their needs shopkeepers would lose business and commerce would come to a halt. But if savings were only intended to accumulate money for a future purchase one could hardly consider them true savings. Father would set aside a few rupees only to spend them all on the next shopping expedition.

I wanted to understand how a person could own a spacious bungalow, spend lavishly and still keep adding to his bank account. My professor claimed that if property and capital were used to build up yet more capital the economic system would collapse. The words whirled by. Part of the problem was that the professor never used chalk and blackboard. My attention drifted to the algae lining the blackboard frame. In the rainy season tiny plants sprouted from folds in the algae. The damp went up all the way to the ceiling.

When I was the first to come in for evening classes I would find herons moving about in the classroom. They flew off the desks as I entered, leaving behind wet footprints and pieces of uneaten fish. The herons favoured the *pipal* tree, settling on it in flocks, white necks poking out of green leaves. A lecture would be in progress. An heron would stride towards the classroom, flutter in confusion at the door and fly back to the *pipal*. Immediately afterwards a late fellow-student would enter the classroom.

During college elections and at other times too words such as frog, tortoise, heron, crocodile, fish, pond, water, fort were bandied about freely. On account of the fort the neighbourhood was called Fort Environs. The word king was also deployed. The feathers on an heron's

neck are beautiful. These must be the feathers pinned with diamonds into royal turbans. My own house was in the district called Poorhouse Environs. We paid twenty-five rupees for rent.

I met Puttan along the way. An empty bag hung from his shoulders. His face sagged. Puttan was my younger brother's classmate.

"Didn't you buy anything today?"

"Sweet limes are five rupees a dozen. My father sent me out for a dozen at four rupees."

"Why don't you buy a dozen bananas for a rupee?"

"Bananas aren't required. Only sweet limes and salt."

"Salt!" I exclaimed. "Salt is five kilos for a rupee."

"Tata brand refined salt," Puttan said, "is two kilos for a rupee." I helped Puttan buy the refined salt. I could have found him four-rupee sweet limes but they were poor quality.

We didn't do much buying of pots and pans. We purchased spoons occasionally and sometimes a *katori*⁷ or *thali*⁸. This was father's department. A purchase was sure to be made on *dban-teras*⁹ day, even if it was only a small metal cup. Most of the pots and pans we used were familiar to me from my childhood.

I liked the clean look of glassware and enjoyed the care that had to be exercised in its use but my mother was afraid glass would shatter easily. We owned a large brass tumbler which my brother accidentally dropped into the pit latrine six or seven years ago. The sweeper woman had to be called to extricate the tumbler and wash it clean. The tumbler was "purified" over an open flame. My father scolded her when the sweeper woman asked if she could keep the tumbler for herself. Afterwards the sweeper woman complained about us to other families whose latrines she emptied. She told them we had no qualms about using shit-smearing utensils.

Father's discipline of household economy was limited to pots and pans. He would buy pots used and sell them for a better price when he needed cash. He knew the shopkeeper. People would sell new pots for less than half what they cost. The shop was next to the hospital and trade was brisk. When villagers fell ill they arrived at the hospital with their utensils. They would sell these for ready money. Once the older pots were cleaned with acid and the recently purchased ones buffed with metal polish they looked new. In this way shopkeepers

7. Metal cup or bowl

8. Metal dinnerware

9. A day sacred to Dhanavantari, god of healing, celebrated two days before Divali. New pots and pans are purchased that day. Rich people purchase gold and silver.

doubled their profits. They called a time of famine or cholera their 'season'. My father bought from the shopkeepers at this time. Pots and pans arrived in such quantity that shopkeepers refused to buy more. The villagers would plead with the shopkeepers and part with their utensils for next to nothing.

Bronze and metal utensils fetched a price even if they were cracked. Father and Mother looked happy when they managed to sell old bottles, a broken hibachi, rusty biscuit tins or pieces of scrap metal from our pile of odds and ends. While Father was negotiating a price Mother sat on the doorsill and watched. I was ashamed of their haggling. It took our household five or six years to accumulate a decent pile of scrap.

The largest lota, from Jagannath Puri in Orissa, was reserved for my father. After he had finished eating he would drop his false teeth into the water remaining in the lota. My younger brother named the false teeth Father's Mouth. He would pry the jaws open and call out—Mother, Mother, give me a piece of roti. If someone placed a piece of roti between the teeth it dropped into my brother's hands. The false teeth were of local manufacture. They made Father's gums ache if he wore them too long. Father was invited frequently to lunches and dinners because he was a brahmin. Sometimes he set out in a hurry and Mother would send me on my bicycle chasing after him with his teeth. I would accompany Father to these lunches and dinners until I entered high school. My younger brother also came along. Father used endearments or sternness as required to compel us to go with him. I felt shy about entering the strangers' house but once inside I ended up eating more than Father or my younger brother. My appetite pleased Father. When the servers came around he would urge them to pile laddus¹⁰ or sweet crumbled bread onto my plate. Father wore a small piece of cloth on his shoulder. It doubled as a bag or bundle for carrying things. His salary at the lumber depot brought him a hundred and fifty rupees a month. He managed all right.

We never bought the shoulder cloth ourselves. Five or six of the cloths lay on top of other clothes in the suitcase. Father was presented a shoulder cloth each time he officiated at the Thirteenth Day after cremation and at death anniversaries. Sometimes he was presented a memorial tumbler or lota. The lota from Jagannath Puri was inscribed *In Memory of Gangadin*. Another lota was inscribed *In Memory of the Death Anniversary of Misir of Barahimpur*. Father had also accumulated fifteen

10. Sweetmeat consisting of chickpea flour and sweetened milk

pairs of wooden sandals from these ceremonies, and a whole sackful of *janeoo*¹¹ sacred thread. I had left off wearing the sacred thread a long time ago. We brothers divided up the pots and pans among ourselves and conferred names on each thali and tumbler. My *thali* was named Duniya Na Mane¹², my brother's was "Jhumroo",¹³ Father's was named "Ghar Ghar Mein Bhagvan",¹⁴ Mother's was named for a female saint, "Saint Sakhoobai"¹⁵. We had named each thali after an old movie even though the thalis were clearly inscribed *In Memory of the Heaven-bound soul of Bindadin Shukla*. The second-hand pots my father bought from the shop near the hospital bore inscriptions identifying the owner—for example, *Dhanaram Satnami, Village Jora, District Dharseenna*, or, *Bisaboo alias Dukaloo, Village Chokranala, District Arang*. The pots the villagers sold were almost new; the townspeople sold off only cracked and broken pots. It would happen that a shopkeeper would sell new pots and in a few days buy them back at the less-than-half used pot price. My friend was given the role of a very old man in the college annual play. A lot of make up was wasted on having him look the part. The friend was fair-skinned. If he had not been tall he would have played a beautiful girl whose father's sudden death keeps her from going on to college. But fortune favours her. She marries a rich man and lives happily ever after. If my friend had not been skinny he would have been selected for the role of the district magistrate's son. If he had not been fair and good-looking he would have played the servant. The teachers wanted him to play whatever part suited him best. My younger brother was not selected for the annual play. I did not allow myself to feel bad about this. (In any case, most students, save one or two, would never find jobs. The students who were good at chemistry tended to be good at physics too. Many students failed their exams. The students who did well tended to be from well-to-do families. Hukumchand Kothari, who always stood first, came from a family of rice mill owners.)

The role of servant was assigned to a troublemaker in the second year class. He didn't need much persuading to accept. We had advised him against playing a lowly part but he said—and it was true—that he could beat up the boy playing his master any time. He was in my section in the first year. If he showed us pictures of naked women one

11. Sacred thread worn by males of the three upper Hindu castes

12. What If the World Disagrees

13. A comic film featuring Ashok Kumar

14. God Dwells in Every House

15. A film based on the life of Sakhoobai, devotee of Panduranga

day, the next day the same women appeared to have grown big bellied. He was proud of his moustache.

Younger Brother said to Mother, "Why doesn't Father play the old man's part? He is already old; he does nothing but mix digestives and toothpowder. He has a fat nose, so we have fat noses. He has large nails, so we have large nails. You would never mistake him for a gentleman or a merchant. He crushes his own betelnut and has a standing order for roasted chickpeas ground into powder¹⁶. The most we can hope to inherit from him is false teeth, the upper set for Elder Brother, the lower set for me."

I said to Father: "I will pass the examinations this year just as I passed the examinations last year. If you speak to Tivari Ji¹⁷ he will give me a job at the municipality toll post." Father was friends with Baldev Prasad Tivari, secretary of the municipality. Thanks to this friendship our drains and latrines were cleaned morning and evening. Twice father had occasion to complain about our sweeper women; both times the sweeper women in question were reassigned out of our area.

As soon as the sweeper woman saw me she would set down her broom and join her palms namaste¹⁸. This was her good manners. Mine was to join my palms¹⁹ for a teacher or for Baldev Prasad Tivari holding on to my books or shopping bag at the same time. When I was little the neighbourhood barber would greet me saying "I stoop low before your feet." I would answer: "I stoop low before your feet," to the amusement of the elders sitting around. Later Father explained to me that if a person says, "I stoop low . . ." I am supposed to say, "Blessings be upon you."

Whenever Mother wanted to give the sweeper woman leftover rotis or pooris she set the food on the ground. If Mother was engaged in a household task during which she ran the risk of being polluted²⁰ she would wear a silk sari. Father said that silk, wool, gold and rupee coins were unpollutable. "The things you mention," I said to Father, "are all costly. Can't you suggest affordable protection?" I went on to say, "It's poverty that is polluting." "We are poor, too," Father snapped back. Younger Brother declared, "We are Biswah brahmins nobly born."

16. poor man's fare

17. honorific suffix

18. A respectful greeting offered by joining palms together and uttering the Hindi word "Namaste"

19. in the usual respectful greeting

20. from accidental or necessary contact with forbidden things

If I was upset I would not bathe for weeks, even in the summer. In the winter a whole month might go by. Mother called me Barbarian. There was a brahmin Father knew. I had a dread of speaking to him. Unfortunately it was me Father sent to this brahmin whenever he needed to borrow money.

"Father needs fifty rupees."

"Do you have the sacred thread on?"

"No," I would answer.

"Come back after you have bathed and put on the thread." Father was afraid to go himself. I was forced to bathe, sling on the thread and return to the brahmin's house an hour later. The brahmin was a strict moneylender dangerous to those who were late with payments. He employed certain proverbs frequently. A son who claims his patrimony to live apart is no better than a neighbour. There is no shame in looking out for yourself. Better direct refusal from a miser than shilly-shallying from a friend. It takes dying to get to heaven.

Requests for my horoscope started coming in a year before my graduation. A reply-paid postcard would be enclosed. Father or Younger Brother copied down my horoscope on the reply-paid card. In the accompanying note Father would put in an inquiry about their "intentions." By "intentions" he meant "dowry." Once or twice Father was so eager to show me off he came to the college together with a prospective father-in-law. I recognized a future father-in-law in one glance. He would be carrying a bag in his hand packed with rug, change of clothes and lota. Father had let it be known that I would land a job immediately after graduating. If a prospect was the doubting kind Father took him to meet Baldev Prasad Tivari himself. When a horoscope request came from an unworthy seeker Father used the reply postcard for our uncle in Sikathiyapur. The uncle in Sikathiyapur never wrote back. Uncle feared that if contact were resumed Father would come down to claim his five acres of family land. Father, for his part, was never able to raise the rail fare. I was six months old the last time the family went to Sikathiyapur. That was twenty years ago.

The sweeper woman would ask mother about negotiations for my marriage. Mother had promised her the gift of a sari when the wedding took place. The sweeper woman was not much of a buyer. It was only when she had five paise to spend that she became a buyer. She kept track through Mother of households to which Father was invited for ritual meals. There would be many guests at these meals and much leftover food afterwards. The sweeper woman sat by the rubbish heap waiting her turn. Rubbish heaps had their own classes.

The merchant Nattinani's rubbish heap included many objects I would not have thrown away—things people like us could use. It would not have surprised me if the sweeper woman found something she could use from among the objects our household threw away. I wondered if the sweeper woman had a rubbish heap too. From the trash bins behind the law courts I had been able to salvage carbon paper, erasers, pencils, pen-holders, packets of ink tablets, blank paper, stamps, large envelopes. The thing that amazed me most about the sweeper woman was the way she tucked a bundle of rotis into the sari at her waist and balanced at the same time the basket of shit on her head.

Excitement from the annual play lasted late into the night. Our hostel consisted of twenty-five identical rooms along a single corridor. Most of the lights in the hostel were still burning; only four or five rooms remained dark. A number of students wandered outside in their underclothes, rubbing gudakoo²¹ into their gums before going to bed. The language teacher, who was also in charge of college sports and performances, stood apart from the others on the verandah. His short size gave him an appearance of stockiness. The other teachers on the verandah were surrounded by students. An animated discussion was in progress. As the discussion heated up the students working in gudakoo joined the group around the teachers. The tension was mounting, just as a moment before twelve a clock seems about to strike. The teachers stepped down to the lawn below. Many students followed behind as if they were a single organism. The organism moved deeper into the lawn. Some of the underwear-clad gudakoo-chewing students separated. A few of these found perches on the verandah railing. (Eight of the students in the large moving mass with the teachers could be seen with hockey sticks. Cricket wickets appeared. One of the students bounced a soccer ball. The student with the ball lived near the mosque. The students with hockey sticks were from the brahmin neighbourhood. The students who had nothing included among them some who were skilled in kabaddi or in kho-kho. A teacher snatched the soccer ball and ran across the lawn. The green bushes at the edge of the lawn were black now. They were bushes of darkness. The teacher tossed the ball towards the bushes. The ball made dull bounding sounds before dropping dead. The melee of students ran this way and that. There were poor students in the crowd but indistinguishable from the others. Besides Muslims and brahmins there were other castes as well. The

21. a mixture of tobacco and unrefined sugar

teacher may have pulled out a whistle, then thought better of it and gone home.

He may have thought somebody was blowing a whistle repeatedly. He was committing foul after foul. He was hunting for his glasses for the coming day. The look of everything on a new day was like putting on one's glasses. Who said he had bad eyesight? He was capable of detecting a small tear in a library book. He was capable of seeing a marble enlarged to the size of a soccer ball. The air was crammed tight, no tipping this way or that. As far as my eye could travel in the dark lay my soccer ball and I was inside. I had just been kicked hard. Why did my thoughts run this way?)

The teacher was usually seated in the small Game Room surrounded by broken equipment. Two large clubs rested against his desk. Cricket balls weighted down various piles of paper on the desktop. His own head did the work of paperweight upon the heap of his body. He believed that a person should cut a sporting figure at all times. When he rested his cheek in his hand he cut the figure of a goalie about to toss the ball back after having blocked a goal. Of course his head remained where it was. In fact anything could remain where it was. Or be somewhere else. There was a problem and there was never a problem.

Many people had come to see the annual play. My father and my friend's father decided not to come. My friend's father ran a small tobacco shop. My friend was addicted to tobacco. The play was performed in a large hall. It got over at one. Municipality secretary Baldev Prasad Tivari sat in the first row. I would steal a glance at him while I watched the play. Whenever something pleased him, I felt happy too, but he left early. After the play ended, the watchman was found sleeping on the dhurrie in front, half of his body under the raised platform of the stage. Two other neighbourhood boys lay asleep nearby. My friend's performance was the best. The hall emptied as soon as the play ended. The few people who carried torches were joined by people without torches. It was dark and the ground was uneven. One or two people accompanying those with torches might have been friends; the rest were happy to walk along. Baldev Prasad Tivari had left in a motorcar with his personal friends. One other person, the District Magistrate, had left in a motorcar. He had travelled alone. The light from a torch was no motorcar whose use could be restricted to some and not to others. The road was for general use. So long as there was a crowd milling about one-thirty at night did not seem one-thirty.

Then it was two in the morning. Only small bulbs remained lit. The larger bulbs had been switched off.

Noises emanated from behind the stage. Students were changing out of costumes. The principal and three teachers sat on chairs drinking tea. The troublemaker who played the role of servant squatted on the floor in a corner, smoking country cigarettes. The principal continued to sip his tea as he walked over to the boy, slapped him hard and flung the country cigarette out of the boy's mouth into the pond. To put out a country cigarette requires a pond's worth of water. The boy had whined unnecessarily during the performance. He had played the part of a thieving servant hired at twelve rupees a month but never paid on time. Even after the play ended the atmosphere of a play prevailed. Inevitably, if the annual play for the year had a servant's role a troublemaker was selected to fill it.

After the headmaster left the boy who had played a girl came out from behind the curtain and left the hall. One of the teachers followed him. I met my friend where props from the play were being packed into a large wooden crate. My friend had misplaced his shoes. He still had his make-up on. He looked tired. "You are an old man," I told him, "who can no longer find his shoes." We got the teacher's permission to go and left immediately.

I wanted to get home but my friend sought adventure. "Can you believe that shops in our town close at eight-thirty?" he asked. It took two or three hours after shops closed for all noises to die. "Shops should stay open all night." I was waving an empty cloth bag in the air as I spoke. We had arrived at the main road. I placed myself in front of a large empty house and shouted for all to hear: "This house is not for sale." "Even if it had been for sale," my friend said, "it wouldn't fit inside your bag. How will you take it home?" "If you have a home," I answered, "why would you need to bring another house there?"

My friend stumbled when we reached the bazaar. "Help me, please," he pleaded. "My age is showing." He made me smile; I joined in with his prank. He leaned against me, resting his left hand on my right shoulder. "Your face is identical to your father's." On hearing this my friend launched into wheezing like an asthmatic. The dogs in front of the butcher shop pricked their ears and began to howl. My friend stopped wheezing. The howling frightened him.

A margosa tree grew in the open just adjacent to our house. In the darkness it looked less like a margosa tree than an actor tree playing the margosa tree's role. There were many such trees. Beyond the trees lay the magistrate's bungalow with a car in the driveway and the porch

light on. From the stillness of the bungalow it was impossible to tell that a few hours earlier the magistrate had been in the audience watching our performance. The bungalow, too, seemed to be playing the magistrate's bungalow. In fact, the entire atmosphere in which we were enveloped had stepped out of a play and not yet wiped the make-up off.

"Your shop is very popular," I said to my friend. "Why do you say lines which are not in the script?" my friend objected. A voice called out from behind. It was a teacher bearing down upon us with his torch. He flashed the torch in our faces. "Shyamlal, why aren't you out of your costume? Why did you run away before snacks were served? You know I am the one accountable for costumes and props."

"My shoes disappeared. Who is accountable for those?"

"Beat me with your shoes when you find them," the teacher said in disgust and stalked back to the college.

There was a large field ahead of us. On account of it being very dark the field had spread into the darkness above and around. From past experience I was able to guess where the ground might be. Using the same experience I wanted to find the goat-path and cross the field.

A primary school lay to one side. On the other side of the field, across from the school, there was a mound topped by a tamarind tree. Below the mound there was an Eidgah²² and on the lane behind the Eidgah there was the Randhir country cigarette factory. The country cigarette factory marked a run-down neighborhood called Bharkapara. Most of the inhabitants of Bharkapara were *mahars*²³ who provided cheap labour for the factory. All day long men, women and children made country cigarettes, rocking back and forth as they rolled *tendu* leaf over crushed tobacco. There were no latrines in the neighborhood. The inhabitants of Bharkapara shat in the open field. A stench hung over the mound.

The communist party had a small office here. Every now and then a procession of fifty or a hundred people would start from the office, filling the air with slogans. The procession included women and children. Eight or nine-year olds were quick at rolling cigarettes. They left off schooling in the third or fourth class to earn wages for their labour. Father urged me to study hard. He warned that I would be reduced

22. Eid-gah: an enclosure set aside for Eid celebrations

23. one of the lower Hindu castes now converted to Buddhism

to making country cigarettes if I failed the exams. Not one person from the *mahar* neighbourhood was enrolled in the college. A few days earlier younger brother had told Father that he was bored with studies and ready for a paying job. "Go make country cigarettes," Father said with derision. I understood that *mahar* women and children worked alongside the men because there was no other way to pay for food. Father didn't want us mixing studies and part-time work. "In a good household," Father said, "one person earns while the others study to become qualified. One should study and become qualified, even if it means one meal a day until studies are completed." Once we were qualified we could eat two meals a day. Was it conceivable that qualifications led to something more?

When we were in primary school we spent a lot of time in the large field. One of our games was to chase after a kite's shadow. We believed that if we dropped a strip of paper in the shadow of a flying bird the strip would turn into a silver rupee. We stuffed our pockets with strips of paper and waited for kites to appear. Sometimes we had no scratch paper on us when we sighted a kite. Hurriedly we tore fresh pages out of notebooks. The kites came wheeling high above the field. Their shadows slid over uneven ground and across the mound. We ran after the shadows, bending forward, strips of paper ready. A shadow! We let the paper flutter down, only to find the kite had veered away. If a wind rose, our abandoned strips of paper blew across the field.

I was good at climbing the tamarind tree. Some students who felt the urge to go while they were on top of the tree peed onto the ground below. I was careful to pee before I got on the tree or else controlled my bladder till I climbed down.

"Can you see the kite in the sky?" I asked.

"How I can see in the dark?"

"Do you have scratch paper?"

"I have a fountain pen."

"What would a fountain pen turn into? The darkness is the shadow of an immense kite."

I found a wad of paper in my pocket. It was a receipt from the morning's shopping. We laid the piece of paper on the ground. My friend swooped down and grabbed the receipt. I fought with him and got the receipt back. The paper remained paper.

It bothered me that the bazaar was closed on Tuesdays. I stayed at home studying even though there was no special study space. I remembered the college crate for props with room enough for two to sit comfortably. My house was a crate attacked in the evenings by the

smell of burning leather. The entire neighborhood smelled of burning leather. When I asked mother she told me the smell came from linseed oil. We cooked with peanut oil which cost more. I stopped shopping for the family when examinations approached but I worried that Father would get cheated. I also worried about a rise in prices.

Mother had a small wooden box she had inherited from grandmother. She filled its small compartments with loose change, areca nut, a miniature book of hymns to the Goddess Durga and two twists of yellow-coloured thread. She knotted each twist of thread – one for my age, one for Younger Brother's – on our birthdays. Mother was addicted to opium. She rolled balls of opium the size of coriander seeds and kept these in a small container in her wooden box. She made little balls out of hair which snapped when she combed her hair. She plaited a braid out of the saved balls and used it to tie her hair into a bun. I told her jokingly that she should knit me a sweater out of the snapped hair. I offered to shave my head so she could weave me a cap. The balls of hair, a wooden comb, braids of hair and an opium case – all had their place in the box. The box stayed locked; its key dangled from a piece of string around Mother's neck.

Tuesdays my friend would come to my house. My friend was smarter than me and owned all the required textbooks. We would roll a mat out on the verandah and sit together to study. Younger Brother joined us. Both of us were dressed in blue shirts and khaki shorts. My friend's mouth was smelly. "Chew some powdered tobacco to get rid of bad breath." "Bad breath?" my friend said. He leaned into my face and exhaled. I pushed him away. Younger brother caught hold of my friend's hands and I got to breathe right back at my friend. "Ha!" I said, letting out a huge puff of breath. "Ha!" I said again. Just then Father appeared at the door. He was carrying a bottle of peanut oil in the right hand and holding on to the knot of his dhoti with the left. Father took his sandals off by the door.

"Namaste, Uncle," my friend said.

"Which shop is open on Tuesday?" I was agitated.

"There's a shop in Nayapara," Father responded.

"They must have cheated you again," I muttered to myself.

"We ran out of cooking oil," Father said.

"How else can we sauté vegetables?" Mother asked. "You will not eat unless there's a dish of vegetables."

"I won't eat no matter what you cook now," Younger Brother said.

"Nine rupees a kilo. It's clean oil," Father remarked.

"I would have got it for eight rupees if you had waited a day."
"That's enough," Father said angrily and went inside. Mother followed him in.

"Can you guess where the bottle of oil is now?" I asked my friend.
"How would I know? Must be in the kitchen."

"It will be hanging from a nail in the kitchen wall," Younger Brother said.

Sounds of digging could be heard from the kitchen.

"Father must be burying the oil in the ground," Younger Brother ventured.

"Let's go and see," my friend said.

"Why would he be burying it? There's no cap on the bottle. Dirt will get into the oil."

Father was shaking the dust out of jute sacks when we arrived in the kitchen. He placed one of the sacks on the ground and sat down near Mother. "Old bronze is nineteen and a half rupees a kilo," he said to Mother.

"New bronze?" I asked.

"Forty rupees a kilo. Old brass is going for fifteen rupees."

"Sell off the two-kilo thali," I said to Father. "It's no use to anybody."

"It was part of your mother's trousseau."

"The outer and inner tubes of the bicycle need replacing," Younger Brother said. We were trying to spot the bottle of oil.

"Where is the bottle of oil?" I asked Father. "I can take it back."

Father began dicing potatoes. "Let it be," he said.

Mother lay asleep in the corner in her dirty sari. Her feet were visible, thin and wrinkled. I could see anklet rings at her ankles and smaller silver rings on her toes. "Wake up, Mother. Wake up," I shouted.

"Don't disturb her," Father said.

"What happened to the silver ring on your other toe?" Younger Brother asked. Mother sat up with a start. She saw it was only us and lay down again. "You've lost your mind," Father said to Mother.

My friend pointed to a hook on the wall. "The bottle!" he whispered.

An empty shopping bag hung in front of the bottle. Father had stopped dicing potatoes. The three of us hurried outside. I had the bottle in my hand. I told Younger Brother to go and study. "I want to come with you." When he reached for the bottle I grabbed his hair and pushed him away. Younger Brother left. What could I do? It was

important for Younger Brother to study. I didn't have a chance to change. I was still wearing the new khaki shorts. I suspected that the shopkeeper would be unimpressed if he saw me in shorts.

This is exactly what happened. The shopkeeper refused to take the oil back. I decided to walk on past the market towards the railway tracks. My friend had gone back to his house. Two adults sat under a *sisam*²⁴ tree just beyond the tracks. They looked like the local guardians of students from the college.

"Are you the brahmin's son?" one of them called out.

"Yes, sir," I answered.

"Have you quarreled with people at home? The examinations have not started yet, have they?"

"No, sir." I turned and faced in their direction.

"What are you doing here? Go back home. The mail train is due any minute now."

They noticed the bottle of oil when I started to walk back.

"What's in the bottle?"

"Peanut oil."

They broke into laughter.

Some oil spilled as I carried the bottle home. Parents got worried on the day examination results were announced. Two years earlier a student who failed the examination threw himself in front of a train. Since then parents and guardians kept watch over wells, ponds and railway tracks. The local police sent a detachment. College windows opening out to the pond were bolted shut. I cursed myself for heading towards the tracks.

I told Father I was not ready for marriage. My voice had deepened and I could shout creditably. My friend and I got into a number of fights. I did not enjoy strolling through the market. In any case, we had less money to shop with. I began frequenting the Bharkapara sub-library. The market was my enemy. I had a better understanding now of deception, hoarding and profiteering. The commerce and economics professors had lost their jobs at the college.

Translated from Hindi by Satti Khanna

24. *Delbergia sisu*

Tiruppavai: An Introduction

H.S. Shiva Prakash

Tiruppavai by Andal is one of the most celebrated Bhakti texts composed in Tamil. It is a long narrative-dramatic poem in which the speaker is one of the *gopikas*, cowherd girls of Gokula, a pastoral utopia ruled by the mythical Nandagopala, the father of Krishna. The action of the poem consists in her going about waking up other *gopikas*. She leads them, stanza by stanza, to Nanadagopal's house. Towards the end of the poem, led by the speaker, *gopikas* come face to face with Krishna and pray for the boon of his love. The poem consists of eight-line stanzas numbering thirty.

Tiruppavai literally means 'sacred vow'. *Tiru* means sacred (*Sri* in Sanskrit) and *Pavai* was the vow observed by young women of Tamilnadu since ancient times. Young girls, according to an ancient custom, would take bath in a pond in the early morning during month of *markali* (between December 15 to January 15). The performance of this ritual was believed to bless them with a good husband and many children. Andal transformed this folk fertility ritual into a devotional act through this poem.

Andal occupies pride of place among *Azhwars*, Vaishnavite saints of Tamilnadu, who revolutionized the culture and society of the period. Among the eleven great devotees of Vishnu, the seventh one, Andal, was a woman. The pantheon also included an untouchable, Tiruppan Azhwar. This shows how Tamil Vaishnavism spoke to all sections of society.

Andal is believed to have lived sometime between the 6th and 9th century A.D., and her another name was Godadevi. Andal's birth was miraculous. Her spiritual father Vishnuchittan or Periya Azhwar discovered her in a *tulasi* (basil) grove. She appeared in a town called Srivilliputtur in Tamilnadu. Human love and marriage were not for

her. She took Lord Vishnu for her husband. The legend goes that the Lord told Vishnuchittan in a dream to give her to him in marriage at his temple in Srirangam. Accordingly, she was taken in great style as a bride to Srirangam where she is said to have merged with the Lord. The alternative legend says that the Lord himself came to Srivilliputtur and took her in marriage.

Andal composed two works of unusual poetic beauty, *Tiruppavai* and *Natchiar Tirumozhi*. Both were included in *Nalayia Dinya Pirabbandam*, an 11th Century anthology of Tamil Vaishnavite poetry compiled by Nathamuni. Her works are held in great esteem in Tamil Vaishnavite tradition. They are recited as part of daily worship at home and in temple. The later Vaishnavite exegetical literature has read a lot of esoteric theological meanings into the text. For instance, the eight line stanzas of *Tiruppavai* are said to symbolize the eight-lettered mantra *Om Namo Narayanaya*. Each stanza is supposed to speak of different stages in spiritual path. However, this work has great literary and cultural value. It is the earliest depiction of Brindavan, the Vaishnavite pastoral utopia, which provides the mythical backdrop of both devotional and secular love poetry in succeeding centuries all over India. It created a new aesthetic fabric into which are woven several strands from Vedic, Tamil classical and folk traditions. Further, it set the tone of women's devotional poetry in other languages. It is at once a poetic, devotional and ritualistic performance text.

The present translation was undertaken in spite of there already being other translations in English. The eight-line stanza and the structure of images have been adhered to, to a large extent. The earlier English and Kannada translations have been consulted. A sincere attempt has been made to keep as close as possible to the sound-look of the source text. Alternative textual variants have also been considered.

Andal

Tiruppavai

The Sacred Vow

1

On the full-moon day of *Markali* month
Come, let's bathe in the pond. You,
Little beauties from cowherds' shire
Full of wealth beyond all bounds!
Nandagopala's sharp-speared mighty son,
The kind-eyed Yashoda's little lion cub
Narayaṇa will himself give us boons. Bathe
And be praised. Hail! Our vow!

2

O girls who will gain great fortune!
Listen to our tasks during the vow:
Singing of Lord prone on the milk sea
We will drink no milk or ghee,
Will wear no flowers in the braid,
And give up driveling and mischief.
Listen! We will give bountiful alms
And think of the higher path. Hail! Our vow!

3

The lofty god who measured the worlds!
If we praise him and keep the vow,

Evil will end; it will rain thrice a month;
 Carps will leap from lush rice fields
 And bees rest among lilies' clumps
 Just hold and squeeze hard udders
 And cows will yield pots of milk!
 O ceaseless fortune! Hail! Our vow!

4

Come down, O impeccable rain!
 Plunge into the ocean and rise with water
 Thunder, dark-hued, like First One
 Blaze forth like discus in the long-armed
 Padmanabha's hands. Fall non-stop
 Like the downpour of *sharngya* shafts.
 Come! Rescue the world when we
 Bathe in *Markali*. Hail! Our vow!

5

That great wonder from North Mathura,
 The dweller on the Yamuna's bank,
 The diamond born into the cowherd's clan!
 Damodara that lit up mother's frame!
 If, pure in body, we dwell on him
 Sing his praises offering flowers, all our sins
 Of past and now will burn like cotton wool
 In yawning flames. Hail! Our vow!

6

Listen to birdsong! Can't you hear the boom
 Of white conch from Bird-king's temple?
 Rise! Sages place in their hearts Him,
 The Seed on the snake bed in the ocean,
 Who sucked poison from Pootani's breasts,
 Who kicked the demon Shakata,
 And repeat sweetly: "Hari, Hari,"
 Our souls are soothed. Hail! Our vow!

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7

Listen! The warble of skylarks! Can't
 You make out their wondrous speech
 You, crazy? O lovely one! When gopi's
 Are churning the buttermilk, the pearls and disks
 Of their necklaces swing. Can't you
 Hear and see O best of women
 Narayaḍa's name and Keshava's form?
 Open the door! Hail! Our vow!

8

The east is bright. Buffalo calves have
 Left for grazing. Stopping the girls
 On their way to the holy bath, we have
 Come to wake you. Wake up!
 O wise girl! Beat the drum!
 If we serve king of gods who beat
 The mighty demons and split up the horse,
 He will grant us all. Hail! Our vow!

9

Look! The lamps around jeweled house!
 Ah, the fragrance! Still on bed,
 O cousin girl? Open the diamond door
 Wake her up! You, silent aunt!
 Is she dumb, deaf or just lazy?
 What drug can cause such sleep?
 "O Magician O Madhava O Vaikuntha!"
 We go on repeating. Hail! Our vow!

10

You observed vows and reached heavens
 O mother! Dumb, these doors shut!
 Hurt by the basil-decked Narayaḍa,

Giver of every one of our boons,
The defeated Kumbhakarna has sent
You such strange sleep. Does sleep
Still cling to you? O precious pearl!
Unlatch the door. Hail! Our vow!

11

O golden shoot of the impeccable cowherd
Clan that milk countless cows
And strike down hoards of foes!
Why cower like a snake in its whole?
Turn into a wild peahen. While girls
Come thick into your backyard singing
Of the pearl-hued, why be still and silent?
Why such slumber? Hail! Our vow!

12

Hearing the plaintive bleating of calves
The milky udders of buffalos leak by themselves,
Wetting the floor of the house. O sister
Of such a rich house owner, can't you
Rise? When snow has started falling,
Right on your threshold they are
Singing of the slayer of Lanka's king.
"What sleep!" wonder your kin. Hail! Our vow!

13

Singing of the slayer of Baka, the demon bird
And of the worst of monsters, little girls
Have already reached the holy pond.
Except the morning star, the rest have dimmed
O doe-eyed girl! O bee-eyed girl!
Why are you lying down and not
Bathing? The moment is precious.
Throw out sleep, the thief. Hail! Our vow!

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14

Look! Lotuses have bloomed and lilies,
 Folded up in your backyard garden well.
 Saffron-clothed sages with shining teeth
 Are walking to the golden temple!
 "I will wake you up," you had lied.
 Wake up sister. Shame on your tongue!
 Sing of the lotus eyes of the lord
 Of conch and discus. Hail! Our vow!

15

"Hey, little parrot! Still asleep?"
 "Don't disturb. Go on. I will follow"
 "I know you have a lying mouth"
 "Yes, you surely know. I am like this"
 "Get up, you! What fortune is greater?"
 "Have others gone?" "Come see for yourself"
 Sing of the loftiest miracle man
 Who has quelled mighty foes. Hail! Our vow!

16

O Nandagopala's watchman!
 O keeper of gates with flags and buntings!
 Unlatch the diamond gate!
 The Pearl-hued one had promised
 He would give his drum to us,
 Us the simple cowherd girls. Here we are
 Singing to wake him up. Don't shout!
 Open the mighty gate. Hail! Our vow!

17

O generous giver of food, drink and clothes!
 O master! Wake up. O Nandagopala!
 O crown of women! O light of the clan!

Our lady! Wake up. O Yashoda!
 O supreme of sky god who grew
 Taller than the sky and split the sky!
 O golden ankleted Baladeva! Wake up!
 Wake up your younger brother. Hail! Our vow!

18

O Nappinnai! O daughter-in-law of Nandagopala
 The unfailing hero strong as elephant!
 You of fragrant hair! Open the door.
 Listen! The crowing of cocks! The song
 Of koil birds from among *madhavi* creepers!
 How shapely your fingers! As we are singing
 Of your lord, come, come quick.
 Come tinkling your bangled hands
 Open the door with glee. Hail! Our vow!

19

On the breast of Nappinnai on soft bed
 Of smooth cotton in the lighted house
 You are asleep, garlands on your chest
 Speak up! O woman with shaded eyes!
 Can't you be away from your lord?
 Is that right? Can't you keep away
 From him even for half a moment?
 Not proper at all! Hail! Our vow!

20

O dispeller of fear who went beyond
 Thirty-three gods! Wake up, O strong one
 O affluent, candid lord! O conqueror
 Of enemies! Wake up! O purity!
 O Nappinnai with big breasts, slender waist
 And red lips! Wake up! O sister!
 Give us fans and mirrors! Drown us
 In water with your lord, hail! Our vow!

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21

O son of the rich owner of generous cows,
Which, when the pot is held up, melt down
To yield abundant milk, wake up!
O protector of your seekers! You who appeared
In this very world! Wake up from sleep!
Just as, terrorized, your foes come crowding
To your threshold to touch your feet,
We have gathered to praise you. Hail! Our vow!

22

Like shamed kings crowding your courtyard,
We have come to stand beneath your cot
All of us, together, here and now.
Those lovely eyes half-open like lotus!
Won't they fall on us even for a while?
If only you look at us with lovely eyes
Bright like the sun and the moon put together,
All our curses fall away. Hail! Our vow!

23

Like, in terrible rain, the brave lion asleep
In a mountain cave waking up, his eyes spitting
Fire, his mane erect, swaying and stretching
His spine and darting out roaring, you too,
O bloom-eyed, issuing out of your palace,
Come rushing towards us. Take
Your lion-seat. Ask of us as to what
We are here for. Hail! Our vow!

24

Hail! The feet that measured whole earth!
Hail! The art that won splendid Lanka!
Hail! The feet that kicked Shakata!

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Hail! Hands that flung the demon Kanda!
Hail! The virtue making an umbrella of the hill!
Hail! The spear that strikes down foes!
Beating drum, we have come singing of you
Bless us all. Hail! Our vow!

25

Born as one mother's child, the same night
You grew up as another's child
You rose like a volcano in the heart
Of Kamsa envious of you, to quell
His great jealousy. O lord! We have
Come chasing you. If you fulfill our wishes
We will sing of your beauty and strength
What a feast! Hail! Our vow!

26

O pearl-hued highest one! If elders ask
What joys we got from bathing in *Markali*,
Here they are: milk-white conches resembling
Your Panchajanya sounding so loud
That the world trembles; the drums
To announce your glories; the singers
Of your benediction; lamps and flags.
Grant these from peepal leaf bed, hail! Our vow!

27

O great Govinda! O conqueror of the reluctant!
These are joys following beating drums
And singing: wearing fabulous jewels—
Bangles, bracelets and earrings—
That wins the whole world's praise,
We play. And then pour so much ghee
Into the milk-rice that it drips from elbows
And enjoy the feast together. Hail! Our vow!

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We that follow cattle into woods and eat...
 We have no sense, the children of cowherds.
 Still blessed enough to beget you,
 O Govinda free from all faults!
 Not even for a while can we leave you
 We know nothing, cowherd girls calling
 You as we like. Don't frown, O king!
 Grant us our wish. Hail! Our vow!

Worshipping you at dawn, we love
 To think of your lotus feet. Listen!
 You born of those who make a living
 Out of tending and grazing cattle!
 Don't go without granting our wish.
 We ask of nothing paltry. Listen!
 In every birth we will be with you
 As your bonded slaves to serve you
 Burn other wishes. Hail! Our vow!

O Keshava! O Madhava who churned the ocean!
 Gida, of lovely Pudukai, blessed by Bhattannathar,
 The *japa* bead in cooling lotus,
 Has sung, as if by moonfaced beauties,
 These thirty stanzas in Sanga Tamil. To whoever
 Repeats these lines Mountain-armed Lord
 Tirumal of lovely eyes and face
 Will grant peace. Hail! Our vow!

Translated from Tamil by H.S. Shiva Prakash

The Identity Struggle of the Woman of Indian Origin in Mauritian Fiction

Bruno Cunניה

Since her arrival during the eighteenth century, the woman of Indian origin has lived in a society totally ruled by tradition and appropriateness in which she was no more than a second-class citizen. The period leading to the new millennium coincides with a state of self-awareness which causes some Indo-Mauritian women to break away from obsolete customs and stereotypes maintained by patriarchy. In the literary medium as well as in the real world, the only avenues available to them are that of inner exile, immigration and death as the last resort. In most but the extreme cases, a total breakdown from their own culture is impossible as it leads to an identity crisis. In the end, the only way for the Indo-Mauritian woman to position her gendered and racialized body is to take into account elements of both her past and her present to build an acceptable post-colonial space. This is precisely what this article aims to show by analysing of the works of two prominent Indo-Mauritian novelists, namely, Ananda Devi and Shakuntala Boolell.

On the island of Mauritius, the literary world is characterized by an unbalanced ethnic representation of women. Since the start of what is defined nowadays as the original Mauritian culture, authors seem to have derived a marked preference for the textual representation of the Indo-Mauritian woman. In complete contrast to say, the Creole woman who came as a slave, the Indian woman came when the indentured labourers from India were brought to the island to compensate for the loss of the labour force once slavery had been abolished. Being a novelty in the colonial society, the Indian women together with the millinery tradition and customs associated with her, intrigued at the very least. As literary history has it, she was to be the sole subject of the first novels

that were written at the beginning of the last century as illustrated by Arthur Martial's (1933) *Poupée de Chair* and Clément Charoux's (1935) *Ameenab: roman mauricien*. In the colonial male psyche of the time, she represented an object of fantasy that had all the Caucasian features except for colour and culture. And it is precisely those two characteristics that will fuel the fantasy world into which she has to exist in order to be possessed at least by anyone outside her race. If during the colonial period, the standard of excellence remained the woman of European descent, her textual representation declined as a Mauritian identity was being forged. As such, the 20th century has seen a boom in the textual representation of the Indian woman. Today, the island's most popular novelists such as Ananda Devi as well as Shakuntala Boolell depict her in most of their works. As expected, their novels are all written in French, the language of prestige, a way to somehow establish the Indian culture at the top of the Mauritian cultural hierarchy still largely dependant on its colonial past.

It is a literary fact that the image of the Indo-Mauritian woman during the colonial and the pre-Independence period was nothing more than a stereotype. On one side, she was the beautiful virgin standing on a pedestal while on the other side, she was the married woman living a life of slavery at the hands of a tyrannical husband. However, during the second part of the 20th century, we witness a dramatic improvement in the representation of the Indo-Mauritian woman. In parallel to the society where she now works just like her male counterpart, she begins to fight for her rights despite the enormous pressure of patriarchal tradition. No other novel captures the complexity of the contradictory forces within which the Indo-Mauritian woman lives than Ananda Devi's (1993) *Le Voile de Draupadi* (Draupadi's Veil). This novel is all about Anjali who is on the verge of breaking away from society. Beyond the Occident-Orient paradox, which characterises her immediate social environment, this upper middle class woman undertakes an inner voyage. The aim of this journey is to exorcise the patriarchal dominance over both her body and her soul. In a few words, the novel tells the story of a woman whose only son is so sick that she is pressured by her husband to walk on fire. However, this sacrificial act has lots of ramifications for Anjali. It reminds her of Vasanti, her brother, Shyam's, bride to be, had she not perished during a similar exercise. As such, there exists throughout the novel a constant reference to Vasanti's character that represents femininity. Anjali can only aspire to achieve this by taking her distances from patriarchy just like the woman who eventually found death into the fire: "*Elle était trop gaie, trop passionnée, trop*

jouguense, trop belle et surtout, trop entière, se donnant à tout ce qu'elle aimait, tout ce qu'elle faisait, sans aucune mesure" ("She was too joyful, too passionate, too fiery, too pretty but more so, too confident, giving herself entirely to what she liked and what she did without any restrictions") (Devi, 1993: 36). Here, it is important to stress out the repetitive use of the adverb 'trop' whose aim is to symbolise the hampering of the patriarchal values which favours some kind of uniformity when it comes to womanhood. Vasanti represents a danger for both society and for man because by being so natural and free, she escapes a quick categorisation into one of those patriarchal models ruled by status quo. In other words, Vasanti exists at the frontier of the structures established by the patriarchal order. This leads us to an authentic representation of a woman through the imagery of a ghost. Essentially, Vasanti has now become a ghost who accompanies Anjali throughout her married life as well as her life after marriage.

In *Le Voile de Draupadi*, Anjali places herself as the continuation of her hypothetical sister-in-law whom the Indo-Mauritian society used to condemn for her free spirit. Before her death, members of the society refer to her as a witch, a technique widely used by patriarchy to isolate women: "*éna diab dans li*" ["the Devil is in her"] (Devi, 1993: 88). Moreover, the author tells us that all the domesticated women were jealous of Vasanti. This type of discourse is typical of a phallogocentric world where men lead women into hating each other. In the novel, it is clear that the other women, the new slaves, have no intention of letting one of them escape their common destiny shaped by the forces of patriarchy. This shows that the Indo-Mauritian woman has been so brainwashed that she has become the agent through which patriarchy perpetuates its domination. In such a society, the members of the symbolic order have nothing to do as it is a completely alienated matriarchal system that takes care of the oppression of womanhood. We could go even further by stating that in this type of society, the traditional functions of the male becomes obsolete, hence the powerlessness that characterises, Dev, Anjali's husband. As a matter of fact, Dev won't have a word to say when his wife decides to burn all the bridges that links her to her social environment. The end of the novel coincides with Anjali deciding to live a life outside the structures hostile to the emergence of a true femininity. As such, the dead Vasanti becomes more important than Vasanti alive as by being dead, she symbolises the rejection of the patriarchal society. More so, she acts as a catalyst for other women to reflect on the real state of their life as an Indian woman in Mauritius.

Le Voile de Draupadi is surely one of the first novels to describe a total breakdown of the relationship between the Indo-Mauritian manhood and its feminine counterpart. More than a divorce or any similar scheme, we are here faced with a complete and utter rejection of a way of life thought to be timeless and indestructible. Anjali doesn't just reject her husband but also the whole Indian masculine universe where she used to live and into which she has been brought up. The only link she keeps with her old life is her son who she conceives as being an exclusivity of her own body. In Ananda Devi's novel, the concept of maternity is synonymous to the idea of property and this both from Anjali as well as from her own mother. In the unique relationship that links a son to his mother, the role of the man is non-existent as the sum of maternal investment is somehow beyond his grasp. In fact, Anjali's own father is quite absent in her life. Therefore, in both the case of Anjali and that of her mother, we notice the perpetuation of a similar relational pattern respective to the relation between a son and his mother. Although, very few details are given, we are meant to understand that Shyam shares a bond with his mother unlike his sister, Anjali. It is important to note that Shyam's mother never liked the free spirited Vasanti who she considered as too strong willed to bring happiness to her son. Instead, she would have preferred a more passive girl. All this leads us to believe that a woman who has been scorned by patriarchy throughout her existence seeks through maternity, to give life to a male who will in turn perpetuate the status quo. This process will eventually bring her a temporary moment of joy where she will have the feeling of having contributed to patriarchy, that same order which is the very cause of her demise. In other words, the woman who is more or less in rivalry with the other woman has here the opportunity to outshine her rival through her son. By teaching him to hate women, she is in some way getting back to all the other females by condemning them to a life of alienation.

Anjali rejects this way of life as she is without pity for her very own mother. She blames her for having devoted her entire life solely to her unique son. She also blames her for having built a bubble around the hypothetical gifts she saw in him or was sure to have seen in him. For Ananda Devi, the process leading to an emotional overprotection from the mother is seen as a compensatory movement. Please note that it can also be seen as the perpetuation of a vicious circle. At the beginning of the novel, whether she wants it or not, Anjali seems to be taking the same road through the exclusive relation that links her to her only son, Wynn. However, when he falls ill, she begins to put

her whole life in perspective. She eventually decides to walk on fire but this sacrifice doesn't solve anything. The only positive thing that this gesture brings about is that it leads Anjali to reject "*tout ce qui n'est pas Wynn*" ["everything that is not Wynn"] (Devi, 1993: 12). Though she acknowledges that she did need a man to get pregnant, she judges her husband inadequate when it comes to being a parent. This is so because he cannot possibly share the links of the flesh that exists between a woman and her son: "*Va-t'en, ne t'immisce pas entre nous. C'est mon enfant à moi*" ("Go away; don't get in between the two of us. This is my child") (Devi, 1993: 6). This quotation is certainly a first in Mauritian literature as by excluding the male from the result of a sexual encounter, the woman tends to assume her role as a mother, alone. In contrast with the traditional image of the Indo-Mauritian women condemned to live in the shadow of her husband, Ananda Devi celebrates the definitive break with patriarchy in its entirety.

Before *Le Voile de Draupadi*, Mauritian literature used to be full of the traditional image of the Indian husband who is portrayed as the undisputed ruler of the family. In one of the most famous novels to describe the life of Indo-Mauritians, *Namaste*, the author, Marcel Cabon (1965) says about Ram his main character, that he is as strong as a tree. Twenty-eight years later, the role of the Indo-Mauritian man has been so reduced that he is bound to lose his mystical dimension. For his wife, Dev is nothing more than "*une présence qui me dérange*" ("a bothering presence") (Devi, 1993: 5). In fact, Ananda Devi's novel opens up with an explosive situation where a woman questions the love she has for the man who shares her life. We are in the presence of a woman who has finally come to terms with her femininity. Gradually, she uncovers the plot whereby she has been the innocent victim of a process orchestrated by two families who have reached a mutual agreement. In contrast to the depiction of an arranged marriage in a *Father's Wish*, with its fatal consequences, the union of Anjali and Dev is characterized by a feeling of passivity where there is no trace of any passion, whatsoever. Please note that we are here very far from the lust and desire that accompanies the arranged Hindu wedding in *Namaste* where the young couple can't wait to be together. Unlike Cabon, Devi's portrayal of an Indo-Mauritian wedding is one of sterility and dryness. In fact, had it not been for Wynn's illness, Anjali's life like that of so many Indo-Mauritian girls coming from the rich bourgeoisie, wouldn't have been that bad. She would have been perfect like "*ces mannequins empesés qui n'ont d'autre identité que celle inscrite sur leurs vêtements: Pierre Cardin, Christian Dior, Cartier*" ("those fake dummies which have no other identity than the one marked

on their gowns : Pierre Cardin, Christian Dior, Cartier") (Devi, 1993: 55).

The theme of financial success in the Indo-Mauritian society is a leitmotiv in Mauritian literature. In his novel entitled *Une Lueur d'espoir* (A Glimpse of Hope), Dayachand Napal (1988) describes financial opulence as a way for the people of Indian decent to take some sort of revenge over a time not so far behind where they were just poor migrants. The danger here is that some people tend to become obsessed with money and its social ramifications. Very often, behind the façade of social success, lies a financial monster that tends to devour the most resistant of souls, pushing to extreme limits the original plan cooked up by the ancestor. In *Le Voile de Draupadi*, when Anjali throws Dev out of her life, by the same token, she is getting rid of that society, still very much colonized. In such a social environment, a woman exists only as the object of desire of her man, who is himself a toy in the financial world. Anjali has to leave Dev as she can't be what her husband wants her to be: that is some kind of trophy wife who he can take out all dressed up and made up. In one of those social gatherings which comfort the Indo-Mauritians in the idea they have of success, Anjali stirs up a scene which sheds light on the fact that Dev and her have drifted apart. The beautiful mechanism that is at the base of the Indian society on the island is broken, as the woman has felt Draupadi's veil, which is waiting for her deep down, inside of her soul. Only then can she let go of this "*cri de libération*" ("liberating yell") (Devi, 1993: 33) which no man can understand, as everything that lies beyond the scope of the symbolic order is just madness and hysteria for him.

Shakuntala Boolell's (1996) *La Femme enveloppée* (The Concealed Woman) consists of a collection of short stories which tell the story of a bunch of female Indo-Mauritian characters. Here the symbolism of the title doesn't leave any doubts whatsoever on the prime interest of the author: the Indian woman who is trapped in 10 meters of her very own sari. In fact, just as Ananda Devi, Shakuntala Boolell doesn't seem very enthusiastic about the role of the Indian women in the contemporary Mauritian society. *La Femme enveloppée* portrays women who are refused an identity within which they can attain their full potential. The only type of identity allowed for them is a biological and a sexual identity. This double representation of the mother and the maid suggests that all women without exception are bound to procreate. Once inside that patriarchal trap, she has no way out and she is forced to surrender as is the case of Supaya in one short story entitled "*La Femme enveloppée*": "*Il y a des années qu'elle était enveloppée. Pas seulement dans*

du fil, du coton et de la soie brute mais, qui pis est dans les croyances et des prédispositions abominables" ("She had been concealed for years. Not only in cotton or silk but in an even worst manner. Beliefs and in outdated traditions were all around her") (Boolell, 1990: 58). However, Supaya decides to go against the flow as she assumes a dangerous virility just like Smita in another short story entitled "Les Trois pans du sari" ("The Three Folds of a Sari"). In that particular story, Smita is a victim of rape. What distinguishes her from the rest of the crowd is that she decides to take matters into her own hands and thus sees to it that the crime doesn't stay unpunished. Her revenge is immediate and primitive just as dictated by the law of the retaliation: an eye for an eye. From then on, Yadev who had abused her trust by his carefully chosen words would have sooner or later to give up his flashy style which leads him to be so popular among the women.

Here again, the traditional literary pattern that dates back to the colonial times is shattered. This Indo-Mauritian woman has to look within herself to find the necessary will to counter the forces of patriarchy. Smita, goes deep to collect all her energy. In doing so, she substitutes herself to Kali, the Hindu Goddess of vengeance and strikes back at the guilty man to make him pay for his actions. All of a sudden, the victim of rape has become an entirely new person. She now inspires terror in her cold plot to get rid of masculine tyranny. This particular short story depicts the abolition of the sexist stereotype that tends to depict the Indo-Mauritian woman as weak and fragile is gone. The narrator implies a supernatural force coming upon Smita by putting emphasis on her emotions and her physical vitality. If in real life, defeating the enemy may appear hard to achieve, the larger than life dimension reached by Smita makes everything possible. In Indian mythology, the attributes of divinity are not limited to only one sex. As a believer, a woman can unveil a hidden source of power from her beliefs. And no one more that the rapist is aware that his victim has now turned into something that is beyond his control. Hence, in the real world, it will be said that this woman has adopted a monstrous attitude, almost against her nature. However, it is only at this price that patriarchy can be defeated. However for this to happen there must be a decisive factor. In the case of Anjali, it is her son's illness but in the case of Smita, it is the humiliation, she feels in her own flesh that leads her to transgress her condition. Where there was nothing but grief and sorrow, there now is a born again woman who is prepared to take her own life back. Even if her destiny leads her to murder, at least, it is her own wish and not one dictated by the patriarchal order in which

she is an inferior individual. Once she decides to take control of her life, she doesn't have to account for anything anymore. For example, when she comes home after the rape, she doesn't give any explanations. She just gives the ravaged sari to Matadji so that it can be burned together with the trash. No justification whatsoever is required here. In fact, the look in her eyes can be seen as an act of protest in itself.

"Les Trois pans du sari" is a short story that reaffirms the triumph of the Indo-Mauritian woman over her male counterpart. We witness the subversion of the symbolic order. In the name of an impossible act to repress, Smita has been pushed to the limits and she has found herself in an extreme situation. Quite often, we find that one way to end such an extreme situation is death. In fact, Yadev's road to perdition is one full of symbolism. Before his death, he is made to kneel in front of her: "*Il avait fléchi les genoux en signe de soumission, de respect et d'adoration*" ("He had bent his knees in a sign of submission, respect and adoration.") (Boolell, 1996: 25). In return, the Indo-Mauritian woman proposes death. However, we should be careful not to think of Smita as a cold-hearted murderer. There are basically two deciding factors that lead her to do what she does. The first factor relates to the man who still has a very primitive way of dealing with a desire which he can't control. The second factor deals with the signification of myths and the demystification of feminine images that men have interiorised. Throughout Mauritian literature, there exist numerous novels where we find an illustration of the myth of the Indo-Mauritian woman who perpetuates a life of slavery. In Nando Bhoda's (1999) novel, *Beaux Songes*, Shanti is guilty of transgressing the symbolic order as she hides the fact that she has lost her virginity. After the wedding, she is sent back to her parents covered with insults. Here, the author describes an Indo-Mauritian girl "*rouée de coups par sa mère, traînée à même le sol*" ("struck by repeated blows from her mother and dragged along the ground") (Bhoda, 1999: 158). The house of the father has been soiled and the phallic symbol has been destroyed. So, only by dying can Shanti escape the harsh world of patriarchy. Whether in Boolell's short story or in Bhoda's novel, both female characters seek to escape from the forces that keep them into submission. In some way, Smita is much stronger than Shanti who chooses not to fight back. However, sometimes there is a tremendous price to pay for choosing the easy way out.

In the Mauritian socio-cultural context, the masculine supremacy is closely linked to the despotism of the father and the husband. Patriarchy leaves no avenues to hysteric voices as they lead to situations that are bound to cause chaos in the symbolic order. By their outright

insolence, Boolell's female characters come close to violating the masculine space where women, especially Indo-Mauritian women are supposed to be docile and mute. It is then not a surprise to come to the conclusion that their rebellions often foreshadow death, a silent reminder of the symbolic authority. Sometimes, patriarchy has to resort to crime in order to prevent a dispersal of its values. This is so because it cannot allow women to go beyond the boundaries that have been set for them. Wild women are situated outside the limits of society and are therefore impossible to understand and predict. As such, they constitute a danger for an institution whose sole objective is to eliminate chaos in order to ensure its sovereignty. This is the reason why any Indo-Mauritian woman who does not follow the ancestral rules is immediately punished.

The recurrent theme of *La Femme enveloppée* is without doubt the fact that women cannot afford to play the contemporary social game anymore. At some point in time, there exists a discrepancy between a woman's role as defined by an ever-evolving social context and cultural values characterized by a status quo. This situation is very difficult for women to deal with as they are divided in the role they should adopt. Society can't expect of an individual to be a slave on some occasions and to be a totally emancipated person in other instances. In most cases, the Indo-Mauritian woman chooses to have a real life and this often leads to an abjuration of the ancestral values. However, this should not always be the case. A split from family values as well as from Indian roots is not always necessary for the Indo-Mauritian woman to establish herself as an individual. Shakuntala Boolell's 'Le Retour' ['The Return'] tells the story of a woman with Indian roots that has to deal with a plural identity. This short story is about the beginning of a relationship between Shobaluxmi and a French man. Eventually they get married and she moves to France. Here, the Indo-Mauritian girl is torn between her indianity and the identity she has to choose in order to accommodate her new love interest. In other words, that girl is looking for a genuine identity that won't leave her with an aftertaste that she is living a lie. Her self-awareness coincides with the fact that she is transforming into a rebellious teen faced with a social environment which she finds too limiting. At various moments throughout the short story, we come across signs, which accentuate her refusal of well-established conventions. Such a reaction is only there to reveal the negation of a suffocating and harsh reality. As such, there is an abyss between Shobaluxmi and her immediate social environment. For example, we see her turning up her nose at the Indian clichés. The result is that she can no more associate

herself with her cousins whose only preoccupations seem to be weddings and their leisure activities. For her to feel alive, she has to free herself from the obligations of an Indian society ruled by tradition and appropriateness. So, she decides to leave Mauritius where she is being trapped in an environment with which she feels she has nothing in common. In doing so, she will start to idolize an imaginary elsewhere. Once in France, she experiences a strange dizziness as she starts an autonomous life. Without disavowing her own culture, she enriches herself by assimilating other ways of living. The narration stresses this mimetic effect by showing that the Indo-Mauritian woman manages to imitate and even outdo the occidental woman at her own game: "*En moins d'une année, elle acquit une pureté classique qui étonna au plus haut point ses copines*" ["In less than a year, she acquired a classical purity that amazed her female friends"] (Boolell, 1996: 87).

In 'Le Retour', the Indo-Mauritian woman has a good experience with the occidental system of values. Married to Tino, she settles in the french bourgeois way of life which suits her quite well. This experience can only expand her horizons. Isn't she, then, living the dream of adventure of so many young Indo-Mauritian girls who are fascinated by how the other half lives? Shobaluxmi has succeeded where so many have failed. She has managed to project on the other, the stranger, her dreams and her ambition. In a sense, she personifies the young Indo-Mauritian girl of the end of the 20th century who basically is a mixture of fickleness, of an inclination to revolt and of a desire for novelty. Shobaluxmi can be said to be lucky as she gets to accompany her man to other countries like Germany, Italy and Morocco. However, little by little, she feels the need to sort out some kind of equilibrium between a pragmatic Occident and a dreamy Orient. Out of nowhere, come the desires that she had once repressed. She starts dreaming of coming back to the motherland. Suddenly, memories of her childhood bring back the spicy meals, the music and the vast amount of colours in which she once bathed. Nostalgia gets hold of her and forces her to confine herself to an inner psychological space. To many, these are the symptoms of an identity crisis. Gradually, there is a split between the two spaces that were once superimposed namely, the French countryside and the island of Mauritius. The result is that subject finds herself caught between the two sides of the rift.

The Promised Land, the country that has turned her into a free individual is now unable to fill the gap that lies in her psyche. That whole process culminates during a trip to Morocco that turns out to be a journey down memory lane. It is there that Shobaluxmi's harmony

is shattered when she takes a trip to a Moroccan souk. As she travels through the alleys of that market, vague souvenirs of a similar place in Mauritius disturbs the unity she had previously achieved. This shows the impossibility of completely losing oneself in a foreign culture as good as it may be. Sooner or later, you are bound to be taken back to the roots you left behind. We find that same pattern in another short story entitled "Île était une fois" ('Once Upon a Time') where the main character, Mala, lives in Belgium. However, after a long absence, and though she is married to a foreigner, she re-establishes the link with the motherland by coming back to take the daughter she had left behind. In this particular case, in spite of the blood connection, the daughter symbolises the link that binds Mala to the source, the matrix. Sacrificing one identity for another one is asking too much of a person. These short stories show us that having a dual identity must be seen as positive as it makes people stronger. Instead of just ignoring her past culture with all its faults, the Indo-Mauritian woman seeks to reinforce their relationship to their roots. However, this time around, because their emancipation is complete, they have the right to reject what's bad and take only what's good. Against the obsolete values of the past, the cast system and the stereotypes, the liberated woman proposes a new code of conduct where her sex won't be in an inferior position. As a result, the validity of the communal norm seems more and more questioned and sometimes, it is just ignored.

Contemporary fictions depict the Mauritian woman of Indian origin as a liberated woman. However, this emancipation sometimes comes at a cost. For a very long time, totally dependant on her social environment, she has come to understand the complexity of the structures that turn her into a second-class citizen. Once a state of self-awareness is achieved, the Indo-Mauritian woman is left with no choice than to break away from obsolete customs maintained by patriarchy. In the case where her parents are still prisoners of tradition, the only avenues left to that woman are that of inner exile, immigration and death as the last resort.

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Diaries of the Natives from Pondicherry and the Prose Development of Popular Tamil in the Eighteenth Century

S. Jeyaseela Stephen

A 'diary' is a daily record especially of a writer's own experiences, observations and events very often rendered chronologically. This practice of writing and maintaining a diary is somewhat different from a similar system of recording facts and events in a 'memoir' because the writer records the events of his own life and experiences in relation to a particular subject or historical period and the information is gathered from special sources accessible to him or within his reach. The transitory nature of man and the continuity of time must have motivated these diarists to record the happenings of every day. Although kings and rulers in the past have taken the trouble to leave behind records about the political and economic affairs in their kingdoms, it seems that 'diaries' as we understand them today were maintained first time by the rulers of Sung dynasty of China as early as in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries (AD.1125-1212). They have recorded the daily events in the court. One of the specific features of the 'diaries' is that they are private and are not meant for public use.¹

Similarly the diaries that began to be written down by sailors and navigators in the Sixteenth Century could also be said to fall under this category although it was maintained to keep track of time, their movements and encounters. These sailors began to record in their private diaries about the daily observations while navigating the seas, when inter-continental trade flourished. They mainly noticed the movement of the sun, the moon, the stars, winds and ocean currents.²

Diaries also came to be maintained by the officials of the European trading Companies in the Bay of Bengal and they recorded valuable information on trade and commerce in coastal India in the Seventeenth Century.³ The European missionaries who came to spread the Gospel too maintained parish diaries noting chiefly about their apostolic work in various mission stations, recording baptisms, marriages and death besides observations about the beliefs and ways of life of the people they came into contact in the course of their evangelical work.⁴ Thus a variety of diaries for specific purposes came to be maintained since medieval times.

Diaries in Tamil

In the beginning of the Eighteenth Century some native Tamils who came into close contact with the Europeans in business and administration began to adopt many habits imitating them. As a result diaries in Tamil came to be written. The ignorance of the customs, manners and knowledge of Tamil language prevented the French from directly having contacts with the merchants and others and they over-came this difficulty by having some local men who acted as interpreters. Some such Tamil migrants who assisted the French in Pondicherry began to record in Tamil the happenings of every day.

With regard to the contents of the diary we find that the diarists had also simply recorded the news and messages brought mainly by the *barkaras* who themselves became the narrators in the diaries. The diarists had chiefly gathered information on the economic and political activities of the various European trading companies in the Eighteenth Century. Very often the diarists even included rumours, gossips and hearsay too but stated them as such and added that the facts would be verified later, after ascertaining the truth. The diaries being personal recordings, reflected very much the personality traits of the diarists concerned.

These Tamil diarists have recorded faithfully the events which took place not only in the coastal regions where they lived but also in the hinterland towns of the Tamil Coast in particular and South India in general. The emergence of such diary writing in spoken Tamil which was certainly different from the literary prose form adopted by the authors of commentaries of early poetical works, as well as the form introduced by the European missionaries, was something new, since writing in verse was widely prevalent at that time.

Although diary writing by the Europeans in India is noted as early as the Sixteenth Century, the process of writing diaries in Tamil was delayed. It is a fact that Tamil prose developed with the arrival of the Portuguese missionaries in the Sixteenth Century. Prior to this period, Tamil prose existed only in the form of commentaries. Tamil prose writing had not well developed in the strict sense of the word 'prose'.

The specific purpose and function of Tamil prose began with the missionaries' effort to spread the message of the Gospel. It is to be noted that most of the Tamil prose works written by the missionaries were on Christianity and its teachings. These early works expounding Christian doctrines were mostly translations from Portuguese. Roberto Nobili (1577-1656) who had acquired a deep knowledge of Hindu philosophy developed Tamil prose in line with the then prevailing trend that had a strong Sanskritic orientation. Constantius Beschi (1680-1764) otherwise known as Veeramamunivar influenced very much by his own mastery of Tamil poetics, gave his prose style a highly respectable literary orientation. He was the first one to identify the highly literary Tamil prose as *Senthamizh* and the colloquial (or lower standard) as *Kodunthamizh*.

The art of prose writing developed by these missionaries was very much down to earth as it was meant to serve the new converts, mostly from among the lowest castes. Their prose works were intended to communicate the message to the different strata of Tamil society to bring about their conversion.⁵ There was indeed clarity of thought and lucidity of expression in their prose style. These missionaries are to be given due credit for introducing almost all the modern innovations like punctuation marks in Tamil prose especially to suit the requirements of printing which facilitated the mass replication of books through printing, instead of the still prevalent process of transcription. In the light of the above, the attempts made by the natives to write diaries when paper was not freely available locally has to be appreciated. They thereby contributed towards the growth of popular Tamil prose in the Eighteenth Century.

Lost Diaries in Tamil

Guruvappa Pillai, happens to be the first known Tamil diarist.⁶ It was the same Guruvappa who went all the way to Paris to seek justice at the hands of the King of France when his father was unjustly put in

prison by the French-Indian Governor Herbert at the instance of the Jesuits in Pondicherry.⁷ He died in prison on 18 August 1717. We come to know about it from a conversation between Dupleix and Ananda Ranga Pillai recorded in the diary on Tuesday, the 28th of August 1753. It is clear from this entry that this diary of Guruvappa Pillai had been read by Ananda Ranga Pillai,⁸ since Guruvappa Pillai was none other than his own first cousin, it was all the more possible for Ranga Pillai, although only fourteen years old at the time of the death of Guruvappa to realize the importance of maintaining a diary. Unfortunately no copy of the diary of Guruvappa Pillai is now extant anywhere.

It is also evident from the diary of Ananda Ranga Pillai that Thiruvengadam Pillai, the younger brother of Ananda Ranga Pillai also maintained a record of daily events during the siege of Madras by the French in 1746. In fact Thiruvengadam Pillai reached Madras on 13 September 1746 and received necessary paper, ink and register sent by Ranga Pillai himself on 14 September 1746 to maintain such a diary.⁹ Ranga Pillai as per the wish of Dupleix, the French Governor sent his brother only to take note of the events in Madras. Hence it may be said that the diary is not Thiruvengadam's own diary since he had served as proxy for Ananda Ranga Pillai in Madras. It is known that Thiruvengadam Pillai had maintained the diary till his return to Pondicherry on 14 October 1746. We are however not aware whether Thiruvengadam continued to maintain a diary thereafter till his death on 8 September 1754. No copy of his diary is also available today.

Available Diaries in Tamil

The original Tamil diaries were for the first time discovered by Armond Gallois Montbrun in 1846 (hereafter referred to as TD.I) in the house of Ananda Ranga Pillai. Gallois Montbrun made arrangements for taking out a copy of all the diaries. He retained the same (hereafter TD.II) in his house and published an article of sixteen pages in 1849 pointing out their significance¹⁰ wherein he mentions that there were thirteen large registers covering the period between 1736 and 1799 A.D.

Realizing the importance of these Tamil diaries, Edouard Simon Ariel, a French naval officer took out a copy of all these Tamil diaries by engaging scribes in 1849. These copies found their way to France (hereafter TD.III) in 1852 and are presently kept under Collections *le fonds Indien, Groupe Tamoul*, 155-158 in the *Bibliothèque Nationale* in Paris.¹¹

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The same Tamil diaries also attracted the attention of the English in Madras and in the year 1892. Lieutenant General Maclead requested G.W. Forrest, (1894-1900) the then Director General of the Imperial Record Office in Calcutta to obtain copies of them. The English obtained the copy of Gallois Montbrun and made a fresh copy¹² (hereafter TD.IV). Although the original diary (TD.I) somehow disappeared from the residence of Ananda Ranga Pillai, three subsequent copies of the same are now available at three different places such as Paris, Pondicherry and Chennai.

We learn that the originals of the diary of Ananda Ranga Pillai were found missing as late as the year 1884. Vijaya Durai Ranga Pillai in his letter dated 10th January 1902 to Mr. Singaravelu Pillai confirmed that portions of the diary relating to the period 9 April 1760 to 12 April 1761; 26 May 1766 to 8 February 1770 and 10 April 1795 to 15 January 1796 only were with him.¹³ These were the diaries maintained by Rangappa Thiruvengadam and Muthu Vijaya Thiruvengadam.

We are now certain that Ananda Ranga Pillai, (1736-1760) Rangappa Thiruvengadam Pillai¹⁴ (1760-1781), Veera Nayakar¹⁵ (1778-1792) and Muthu Vijaya Thiruvengadam Pillai¹⁶ (1794-1796) had maintained diaries in Tamil for the periods given within brackets. Of these, the latter three Tamil diaries have been published recently, while it may be said that the missing portions of the former have irretrievably been lost. Among the four available Tamil diaries, only selected portions of the diary of Ananda Ranga Pillai in English had been published earlier by the British.

The diary of Rangappa Thiruvengadam Pillai for the period from 1761 to 1768 had been now translated by me into English. The English translation has been done in two phases. First an attempt was made to literally translate the entries in the diary in such a way as to cover whatever was said in Tamil. The second phase consisted editing and polishing the translation to make it more readable in English. This second phase of the work was undertaken in order to strike a balance between the Tamil and the English versions, taking into consideration the three styles of translation, i.e., conceptual, thematic and literary.

Compiling and Editing the Tamil Text of the Diaries

In the course of compiling the diary of Rangappa Thiruvengadam, I had to encounter many unforeseen problems. The most important was that of filling up the gaps by assiduously comparing all the available

manuscripts with different handwritings. During the process of copying down the original manuscripts, copyists had themselves introduced modern innovations such as adding punctuation marks etc., as per their own standards very often determined by their western mentors, rendering them more easily, legible and readable. There would have been many chances to commit errors of omission and commission.

The chief task of comparing all the different copies was an interesting exercise. A close verification of the transcript in the Tamilnadu State Archives, Chennai showed that the entries under the dates i.e., 10th, 11th and 12th January 1761 were different from those found in the Paris copy.¹⁷ The death of Ranga Pillai is simply mentioned in a few sentences in the Paris copy whereas in the Chennai copy detailed information is available. It is stated therein that Ranga Pillai wrote a letter to Chidambaranatha Pillai, affixing his signature, stating that this would be the last letter signed by him. Further he had requested the physician to come home to examine him. His complains about the body pain are entered under 10th, 11th and 12th January 1761. It is possible that Thiruvengadam who must have been busy and upset during the last days of Ranga Pillai could not have mustered the determination to write about the happenings in detail immediately thereafter. He could have done it later when all the hullabaloo must have died down recollecting the events of the past surrounding his beloved uncle's death, who during his life time was more than a mentor, a guide and a philosopher!

Transcribing the text from the original diary was carried out by Ariel through scribes engaged for the purpose. The names of the scribes (such as Rattinam, Dairyadin and Thyaganadin) and the period during which the work was carried out are all mentioned on the opening page of each register. Some entries in the Paris copy have been struck off or erased and fresh entries made. This shows that the original must have been checked with the copy and in all such places we find the initials of Edouard Ariel.

In the Paris and Pondicherry copies both sides of the paper have been used. While in the Chennai copy entries are made only on one side of the paper. Scribes employed to copy the original manuscripts of Thiruvengadam Pillai diary have not adopted the same method of dating the entries. Copyists have adopted different patterns and systems then known and in usage. Regarding pagination in the Paris copy, Tamil numerals are found on the right side corner of all the pages. Numbering of these pages ensured the sequence of the contents in the diary.

The diary of Rangappa Thiruvengadam recorded in two registers are available in the Pondicherry Zonal Office of the National Archives of India.¹⁸ As the pagination of the volumes are in the Tamil numerals, they have not been rearranged in the proper numerical order after restoration and conservation. The paper is also damaged and stained by dampness. Certain words and phrases are therefore missing.

The heirs of Gallois Montbrun have surrendered the fragmentary copy of the manuscript to the French Institute in Pondicherry when it was established in 1958. This small portion of the diary of Thiruvengadam Pillai starts on Wednesday, (4th of Purattasi, Vrisha year) 16th September 1761. Entries in this fragmentary copy are complete without gaps. The diary is continuously available for a period of eight months i.e., till (30th of Panguni, Vrisha year) Tuesday, 12 April 1762. It has not been possible to read this transcript easily in its entirety owing to damage. However a protracted search for the missing portions in the Thiruvengadam Pillai diary from 19 January 1761 to 10 April 1762 did not yield anything useful. It is a matter of great regret that the French Institute copy is in a very brittle condition.

In the case of the diary of Muthu Vijaya Thiruvengadam Pillai, the copy preserved in the National Library, Paris was copied by two scribes called Annasamy and Thiyaganathan in 1849 and it was compared by Dhairiyanathan in 1850. Another scribe called Rathinam was also employed and his copy was compared by Sornambalam and Chinna Durai in 1850. However the copy kept in the National Archives of India, Pondicherry shows that it was copied by Jagannathan and he completed the work of copying the diary on 18 June 1851. The Paris copy is very legible while the Pondicherry copy is not so.

No attempt has so far been made either to identify all the different copies of Rangappa Thiruvengadam Pillai and Muthu Vijaya Thiruvengadam Pillai's diary or to carry out a comparative study of them, as not even a single scholar seems to have had access to all the four copies of the diary as this writer could have. A comparison of all the different copies showed that there were some omissions in coverage.

Significance of the Diaries

The importance of the diary of Rangappa Thiruvengadam Pillai has not been highlighted adequately by scholars in the past. M. Gnanou

Diagou in his letter dated 8 May 1740 to Professor C.S. Srinivasachari of the Annamalai University says that a journal maintained by Thiruvengadam Pillai now in the possession of Ranga Pillai family, awaits careful editing and translation. He says: "I was engaged in the study of it for over a year. The volume is in a bad condition. One must read the entries thrice atleast before they would become visible. But there is not much fruit. Unlike Ranga Pillai, Thiruvengadam Pillai did not perform important tasks. He devoted his time mainly to endeavoring to recover the amounts due to his uncle. For that purpose he saw many Europeans but they did not communicate to him interesting or important news".¹⁹ This however is a highly debatable point in the view of this writer.

V. Raghavan, a Sanskrit scholar in his work (1948) says: "The diary of Thiruvengadam Pillai is to be of lesser historical value than his uncle for Thiruvengadam Pillai did not play as important a part of his uncle in the French affairs in Pondicherry".²⁰ The above opinion must have been expressed only on the basis of the view expressed by scholars earlier who had the chance to cursorily go through the manuscript.

Announcements made by tom-tom, contracts awarded to individuals, agreements and treaties signed by the rulers of South India in various languages like French, Tamil etc., and the letters received in Telugu, Persian, French and other languages are given in the original along with their Tamil translation as desired by the diarists. We find information on the various wars, siege, victory and defeats, birth, marriage, death of various individuals, the natural calamities such as floods and cyclones, festivals and ceremonies celebrated by the Tamils, disputes between the right hand and left hand castes, crime, punishment and judgements in the town of Pondicherry. The diaries do contain very valuable information on politics, trade, economy, society and culture of the Eighteenth century South India in general.

Analysis of the Tamil Text of the Diaries

Diary writing in those days must have been a laborious process. It must have called for single minded devotion day after day on the part of the diarist especially when he also had to attend to a variety of duties and discharge so many responsibilities as an individual, head of the family, trader, broker, diplomat, interpreter/courtier and benefactor. The diary thus maintained by Rangappa Thiruvengadam Pillai served

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many purposes and added immensely to his knowledge of men and matters, besides events. Some days the entries consisted of one or two sentences but for most of the days it was filled with considerable details about the happenings in almost all centres of political power in peninsular India and sometimes also in Bengal and in far away Europe. In fact ships and sailors touching the ports on the Coromandel Coast brought news from all corners of the world in those days. He seldom skipped such occasions without making some entry or other. When there was nothing worth mentioning he summed up the day's events in a sentence or two. Generally he meticulously wrote down the events and developments in the town.

The system of dating adopted by Rangappa Thiruvengadam Pillai, Muthu Vijaya Thiruvengadam Pillai and Vira Nayakkar also deserves to be noted. All the entries in the diary faithfully carried the dates as per the western calendar and its Indian counterpart. Thus we learn that they could easily discern the differences between the two systems of calendar that came into vogue at that time.

From the writings in the diary we could make out the kind of spoken language prevalent all over the Tamil Coast with an admixture of words and expressions from Portuguese, Dutch, French, English, Danish, Arabic, Persian and Hindusthani. Almost every coastal village had persons who could interpret and converse with the European seafarers. Hence it is important to examine the language, style and modes of expression found in the Tamil diary written contemporaneously. The diary is written in the colloquial (*pechu vazhakku*) form used during informal conversation by the people in Tharangambadi and Pondicherry towns. Hence it was written without the frills and flourishes of literary Tamil (*senathamizh* or *ilakkiya-th-thamizh* or *eluththamizh*). Similies, metaphors, proverbs, quotations from works such as Thirukural, Nalayira divya prabhantham are repeatedly mentioned while writing the diary. These diarists wrote the proper names of Frenchmen in the same way it was pronounced in French I could find out the French versions of all the names without a single exception. This stands out in contrast to the present trend among the Tamil purists to Tamilise even proper nouns of Sanskrit origin. The diarists, through their writings exhibit very keen sense of history. Some of the old Tamil place names which have gone out of use could also be found out from the diary.

The Tamil alphabetical usage adopted by Rangappa Thiruvengadam followed the pattern found on the palm leaf manuscripts. He did not

use separate symbols for the long e and the long o. He did not use the dot to denote a pure consonant as distinct from the consonant. There is no change of style or diction until the last pages are reached.

It is interesting to note that Ananda Ranga Pillai started to write his diary at the age of twenty seven, while Rangappa Thiruvengadam Pillai began to write at the age of twenty four, while his son Muthu Vijaya Thiruvengadam at the age of seventeen. Thus from generation to generation the spell of maintaining the diary, seems to have caught the imagination of people at an earlier age.

Ananda Rangappa Pillai and Rangappa Thiruvengadam Pillai had written the diary based on information fed by different people. The *barkaras* who were the official messengers serving the Muslim rulers carried messages to the French also. They always wrote what they considered true. They do not often add their own comments unless warranted. They simply record the fact and if they had some doubt, they state that they would ascertain the true details later on. Some citations such as "I have not felt the need to elaborate everything as it is futile", "I summarise the things since it would (otherwise) fill many pages", "I have heard it yesterday but waited for writing it today" may be worth mentioning here.

Vira Nayakar often quoted the previous entries in his diary and continued writing. This practice is not followed by Ranga Pillai and his family members while writing their diaries. As diary writing is a daily routine, the authenticity of the hearsay information is verified subsequently. No exercise was undertaken by the diarists to verify the facts before recording them. These and other features of the diary gives it the distinction of being considered as the precursors of the present day daily newspapers.

We find some commonality of all available Tamil diaries. All the diarists (Ananda Ranga Pillai, Rangappa Thiruvengadam Pillai, Veera Nayakar and Muthu Vijaya Thiruvengadam Pillai) have divided the day into day-break, morning, noon, evening, night and midnight and also recorded the events of the day separately. The purpose of writing the diary is spelled out in the opening page itself by Ananda Ranga Pillai and Veera Nayakar. Rangappa Thiruvengadam and his son Muthu Vijaya Thiruvengadam do not explicitly state why they were recording these events perhaps it was a continuation of the work started by Ranga Pillai, their more famous ancestor. For almost a whole century this tradition or *marabhu*, if we may say so, is followed by the members of the family of Ananda Ranga Pillai. Veera Nayakar on the otherhand actually began the practice himself and therefore has spelled out the purpose.

To conclude we may say that as the Tamil language style found in the diary is colloquial, some scholars hold the view that it does not merit literary attention. It is to be noted that the Tamil diarists of the Eighteenth Century may have been influenced by the natural and elemental urge to 'write-as-you-speak'. They have invented a style of writing incorporating dialogue within their narratives.

Notes and References

1. The existence of such diaries in Asia was brought to the notice of the public by Edouard Chavane and K.K. Flang. See, "Voyageurs Chinois Chez les Khitan et les Joutchen," *Journal Asiatique*, Vol. IX, 1897, pp.374-441; Vol. XI, 1898, pp.351-439; See also, Herbert Franke, "A Sung Embassy Diary of 1211-1212 : The Shih-Chinz-Lu of Cheng Cho", *Bulletin de École française d' Extrême-Orient*, Vol. LXIX, 1981, pp.178-207.
2. See, *Diario da Viagem de Vasco da Gama*, 2 Vols, Porto, 1945; C.H. Coote, (ed.,) *The Voyage from Lisbon to India, 1505-06, Being an Account and Journal by Albericus Vesputius*, London, 1894.
3. *Dagh Register Gebuden int Casteel Batavia van het Passerande daer teer Plaeste als Over Gheel Nederlands Indie, 1624-1682*, 31 Vols. The Hague and Batavia, 1887-1931. See also, Streynsham Master, *The Diaries of Streynsham Master, 1675-80*, (ed.,) Sir Richard Temple, 2 Vols, London, 1911.
4. K. Pamperrien, (trs.,) *History of the Tranquebar Mission: Worked out from the Original Papers*, by J. Ferd Fenger translated into English from the German of Emile Francke, Tranquebar, 1863, Madras, 1906, p. 238.
5. S. Jeyaseela Stephen, *Portuguese in the Tamil Coast: Historical Explorations in Commerce and Culture, 1507-1749*, Navajyothi, Pondicherry, 1998, see chapter 9.
6. Gुरुवा Pillai, was the eldest son of Nayniappa Pillai. He fled to Madras and travelled to France by way of England. He petitioned in person against injustice done to his father Nayniappa Pillai by Herbert, laid his grievances before the Duke of Orleans, who was then regent. As a result that Monsieur Herbert in February 1719 was sent Home under restraint. In the mean time, Gुरुवा Pillai in France embraced Christianity on 8 October 1720 and the baptism took place in the chapel of the Royal palace. King Louis XV was his god-father. His name was said to be Charles Philippe Gourouvappa in French. Gुरुvappa was appointed Chevalier of St. Michael on 28 February 1721. He was appointed as courtier and head of the Indian subjects at Pondicherry and so he left France and reached Pondicherry on 1 September 1722. He assumed into the office of dubash and courtier on 18 August 1722. This Gुरुvappa Pillai died without issue after two years about the close of August in 1724.
7. Nayniappa Pillai was appointed as dubash and chief agent of the French East India Company in Pondicherry in 1709 by M. Herbert, the Governor

of Pondicherry. The Jesuit superior Jean Venant Bouchet was annoyed at the appointment of a Hindu to the post of dubash and he sent letters to France to appoint a Christian. In a long letter dated 18 July 1714 Governor Dulivier explained why Nayniappa had to be retained in the post. See, Paul Olangier, *Les Jesuits a Pondichery et l' Affaire Naniapa*, Paris, 1932, p.357. Nayniappa was accused of having incited the Hindu population to leave Pondicherry in 1715. He was also accused of having embezzled money of levying unauthorised taxes. Naynipppa was arrested and the trial began on 29 February 1716. See, Paul Olangier, *Le Jesuits*, *op.cit.*, p.46. Justice Mr. de la Prevostiere declared him guilty. Nayniappa died in prison on 18 August 1717. Benoit Dumas, the French Governor on 20 January 1719 declared the judicial process formerly instituted against Nayniappa null and void as well as the judgment. See, Paul Olangier, *Les Jesuits*, *op.cit.*, p.95.

8. J. Fredrick Price, *The Private Diary of Ananda Ranga Pillai*, (hereafter ARP *Diary*) 12 Vols, Madras, 1904-1928. See the entry dated 28 August 1753. Vol. VIII, p. 404.
9. ARP *Diary*, Vol. II, p.300. Entry dated 13 September 1746. See also, Vol.II, pp.301-302. Entry of 14 September 1746.
10. Armond Gallios Montbrun, *Notice Sur la Chronque en Langue Tamile et sur la vie d' Ananda Ranga Pillei*, Pondichery, 1849, pp.1-16.
11. Bibliotheque Nationale, Paris (henceforth BNP) *Collections le fonds Indien, Groupe Tamoul*, Mss. 144-155 and 156-158; Antoine Cabaton, *Catalogue Sommaire des Manuscrits Indien, Indo-Chinois e Malayo Polynesiens de la Bibliothèque Nationale*, Paris, 1912.
12. Tamilnadu State Archives, (henceforth TNSA) Chennai, Mss. Public Department, (Sundries) Nos.166 to 186B.
13. C.S. Srinivasachari, *Ananda Ranga Pillai: The Pepy's of French India*, Madras, 1940, p.11.
14. S. Jeyaseela Stephen, *Rangappa Thiruvengadam Pillai Natkurippu, 1760-1766*, 2 Vols, Pondicherry Institute of Linguistics and Culture, Pondicherry, 2000.
15. Orsay, M. Goplakrishnan, *Irrandam Vira Nayakar Natkurippu, 1778-1792*, Chennai, 1992.
16. S. Jeyaseela Stephen, *Muthu Vijaya Thiruvengadam Pillai Natkurippu, 1794-1796*, Institute for Indo-Euroepan Studies, Pondicherry, 1999.
17. TNSA, Chennai, Mss. Public Department, (sundries) vol 185A. see fls. 371-74. For Monday the entry starts in the middle page of 373. The record abruptly ends in fl.374.
18. National Archives of India, Pondicherry, (henceforth NAIP), *Eighteenth Century Documents*, Nos, 9 and 436.
19. C.S.Srinivasachari, *op.cit*, p.xxii.
20. V.Raghavan, *Ananda Ranga Campu of Srinivasa Kavi*, Trichnopoly, 1948, p.8.
21. ARP *Diary*, Vol.I, p.1. See the text."I proceed to chronicle whatever I hear with my ears; what I see with my eyes; the arrival and departures of ships; and whatsoever wonderful or novel takes place". See also the text of Veeranayakar where the preamble is given at the beginning of the diary.

The Writer and the Quest for Source Material

Kamal Kumar

What I would like to say about the nature of creative impulse is best illustrated by a Chinese folk tale. According to this story, there once lived a Chinese emperor who held poets, writers, philosophers and all artists in great abhorrence, considering them useless to society. He gave an order banishing them from his kingdom. Some of them were to be imprisoned, some were left to die on uninhabited islands and still others were to be shut up in dungeon-like caves deep inside the mountains.

His orders were carried out and five years passed. The king became curious about the fate of the banished men and sent his soldiers to enquire about them. He was astonished to discover that not only had they survived but each one of them had produced something meaningful out of his experience. Those who had been shut up in caves had carved beautiful sculptures of gods, goddesses, birds, animals and various scenes of nature on the hard mountain rock. The ones abandoned on islands had written thrilling adventures about the daring exploits of sea creatures and mermaids and those imprisoned had produced great works of poetry and prose.

The process of creation involves for the creator, a long, lonely, hard and tortuous journey whereby his innermost self must slowly come out and be fused with the external reality. Literature is an attempt at revealing life, of making it manifest in all its complexity. This act stems from an expansive perspective that encompasses the great and the trivial, the known and the unknown, the eternal truth at the heart of the natural world, the cycle and rhythm of changing seasons, the sound of rain, the magical hues of autumn and the constant revelation

of the mystery of Being and present within it, the process of understanding all this through the bitter-sweet immediacy of the life experience itself.

The relationship between literature and its age is largely confrontational. On the one hand it expresses the ethos of its time and on the other, it also tries to go beyond the boundaries of its particular age, coming into conflict with all that restricts its growth and expression. All great literature at some level constantly strains against the peripheries imposed by its particular age. And to do this, it lives the experience of its time intensely and then scrutinises it, polishes it, refines it and transforms it into some kind of truth, so that the essence of its age comes through. Some intellectuals describe literary activity as serving a purpose — that of self-realization and self-improvement for them; a writer is a discoverer of eternal and incorruptible values and truth. He is neither a slave to joy nor a prisoner of sorrow or fear. His creativity takes the form of individual expression in its free form. Some philosophers are of the view that all literature is ultimately a search for humanism in some form. And it is in this pursuit that it constantly shapes and re-shapes the cultural ethos of its time against the background of its heritage. That is the reason why the literature of any country or age is bound by invisible links to its history; our literature echoes the multiplicity of our historical, sociological and religious backdrop. So it draws upon the Vedas, the Upanishads, all manner of religious thought, social commentaries, the dreams and memories of our collective past and the myths and legends that continue to live in our hearts and minds. So, literature grows in an extensive and a vast atmosphere where a thousand invisible sources strive to produce its visible form. Its springs lie deep in religion, history, politics, philosophy etc. So, a writer becomes both an observer and commentator of his age, and all that has gone before. Like a common individual he engages with his time; but like a prophet, he also sees beyond. Such were the men who wrote works like *Ramayana* and *Mahabharat*.

Evolution, which is the principle behind all life, leads to a constant change of values. Every age, therefore, witnesses a conflict between the old and the new. The changing face of experience creates new kinds of realities demanding different forms of expression and gives birth to new thought. Adjustments are made to comprehend new experiences. And yet another era starts. Literature is an impulse rooted in its social context. All aspects of life as it is lived become the body and soul of literary creation. The writer has to find his own unique code between

the object and the subject. The distance between object and subject gives strength and depth to the writer's creation.

The writer is at once a part of, and apart from, the drama of life around him. Sometimes this distance or detachment from the contemplation of his object, produces at once a deep fascination for the living experience and a desire to reconcile all the contradictions inherent in that experience. The writer sometimes seeks to balance the varied and disparate components of his experience but at other times expresses in a heightened fashion, the deep, irreconcilable complexities of that experience. Societies are in a state of continual flux. The writer not only keeps pace with changes but is trying to expand the boundaries of experience, and sometimes hastens that change. In that sense he is both inside and outside his age. Individual freedom and freedom of creativity are possessions that no harsh physical realities can take away from him.

The writer of today, however, faces a strange dilemma. There seems to be a massive erosion of solid values. The security assured by age-old traditions has all but disappeared. This sometimes results in a desperate urge on the part of the writer to look back to those ideas in myth and history that project his sensibilities far better than the values of his immediate environment. He uses cultural traditions and collective memory to give expression to the truth and realities of his time. Life is a sum total of varied complexities and incongruities and the writer fuses his personal timebound perception with the given knowledge and wisdom of his heritage. In *Guide to Modern Thought* C.E.M. Joad says:

Now real people are not just good and bad. They are not even a simple mixture in which the balance of virtues and vicious elements can be readily struck...A human being is more like a river, than a bundle of qualities, running now fast, now slow, now clear, now turbid, he presents a different surface at every moment. Capable at one moment of supreme heroism, he is guilty at another of incredible meanness.

Dharamvir Bharati's *Kanupriya*, Kunwar Narain's *Atanji*, Dinkar's *Urvashi*, Prasad's *Kamayani* and Naresh Mehta's *Sanshay Ki Ek Raat* are works that prove this point. In this new medium, established and universally known characters like Draupadi, Dhritrashtra, Arjun, Krishna, Gandhari, Ram, Sita, Ravan, Radha, Ekalavya and Karna and

so on are all portrayed as embodying the modern consciousness. So it is that Karna and Drona become opposing symbols of a class system at its cruellest. Through them, the poet poses a question: has anyone in history rebelled against the Brahmins? And through Ekalavya, the point is made. The left-handed Eklavya is a symbol of the 'revolt of the left!' Similarly, the character of Karna is explained in a totally novel way. Through him, the brutal conflict between personal achievement and the unforgiving social demands is portrayed.

Despite his moral strength, his valour and generosity, his compassion and sense of justice, his life becomes a series of humiliations which he has to suffer because of the accident of an abnormal birth situation. Karna becomes the representative of the repressed order.

The Urmiila¹ of Maithilisharan Gupta's *Saket* and the Radha of Ayodhya Singh Upadhyaya's *Preya Pravas* are characters that are analysed and realized not from the historical viewpoint but from the modern perspective. They are drawn in a reality away from the one, in which they have been imprisoned for ages. These characters are to be understood not against the background of dead and eternal values but in the context of disturbing, modern psychological questions. The poets go beneath the surface to search for that rich mixture of contradictions that make them living volatile characters, wholly individual and realized in a wider, more complete, more satisfying manner. It is in this light that we can understand the radical stance of works like Narendra Sharma's *Uttarjava* and Ramdhari Singh Dinkar's *Kurukshetra*. This is not the age of unquestioning reverence for age-old values. The writers have embraced the burning issues of their times. Free association and collage literature are making their presence felt. No longer the attempt to stamp disorder by imposing an order. Instead, there is an attempt to find coherence and order within the anarchy that plagues our lives today.

In the post-modern era, the writer has to engage with a world and a reality which are harrowing and frightening in their fluidity and fickleness. By engaging with it, he has created an environment for dynamic change in which all that once was is now more or less either meaningless or irrelevant. A writer must present his identity through the depiction of contemporary reality. Mass media, computer, Internet, satellite communication and so on demand a revision of what literature is and who it is for. The self-sufficient and closed Indian society has been challenged by the inroads made by multimedia. In this age of high advertising and consumerism, the concept of culture is also undergoing a massive transformation. A whole new world of thought and sensibility is emerging and with it the stereotyped artistic inspi-

ration do not work anymore. The belief in value-systems of the past has given way to understanding and resolving the enormous problems that the present world poses for us. Universal truths have ceased to exist. Definitions which once served as truths are now questioned and found to be inadequate and sometimes simply worthless. Every writer is discovering his reality by the intensity of his experience.

A powerful change can be seen in the literature written by women. In their works, the women writers redefine man-woman relationship. The position of women, the question of their identities, their role in society and their aspirations are all issues that are being raised and discussed vehemently. Woman as a person rather than a role-player is now emerging in the novels of Manjul Bhagat, Kamal Kumar and Chitra Mudgal. A new vision that sees women independently of the social, cultural baggage they have been carrying can be seen in Mridula Garg's *Kath Gulab*, Kamal Kumar's *Hamurger* and Rajee Seth's *Nishkavach*.

The modern writer had revolted against the romantic sensibility and now the post-modern writer finds himself in conflict with the modern ethos. In the new world order dominated by capitalism and globalization, the traditional fabric of society has been destroyed. This destruction has brought in its wake confusion, insecurity and vacuum. Inherited knowledge does not apply anymore and everything must be understood afresh. The culture of a particular period in a civilization is the heritage of a writer and he draws upon it by way of encompassing its values, customs, traditions, rituals and beliefs. But the postmodern sensibility attacks this very heritage and sees it as hollow and deceptive and offering false security.

The downside is that the wholeness and stability of life is being slowly torn apart by a breathless fascination with physical and material gratification. It is a world paying homage to multinationals, Coke and Pepsi, fast-food and multiple T.V. channels.

However this is the 'truth' of today's world. For the writer of today, this is his raw material. He writes of the world he knows, watches and lives in, beset as it is with contradictory forces, cruel ironies and a singular lack of comfortable beliefs. This raw material is the soil in which his creative impulses become fertile. His sensibility bursts forth in so many different forms — each unique to the creator — for the world is one but the ways of looking at it, the compulsions of understanding and expressing its realities are, fortunately, many and myriad.

□

The Ascetic as Hedonist: An Under View of Literature

Mridula Garg

As someone born a Jain, I was schooled to believe that the practice of asceticism was an end in itself. Life was believed to be full of sorrow; the path to happiness lay only in moksha, freedom from rebirth. Anything and everything of a pleasurable nature was to be eschewed. It did not lay down a formal commandment but the prohibition was no less severe. Enjoyment of food or sex was looked down upon. Sex was for begetting progeny and food for keeping alive, that is till one took the decision to embrace death. That was the final blow of the ascetic. The senses constantly made one conscious of the suffering around one. The purpose of practicing ahimsa (non-violence) was to abstain from adding to the sum total of suffering. But nothing could do away with it completely. As long as you were part of life, you were bound to suffer because you knew others did. So you practiced self-laceration. Pain was one of the means of attaining nirvana; of escaping from the relentless cycle of rebirth.

I spent most of my adult life wondering if asceticism and hedonism were not two sides of the same coin? Pleasurable living (bhog) and self-sacrificing conduct looked as if they complimented each other most of the time. For example, the big O or the ultimate bhog, that is sambhog (sexual intercourse) was prone to result in parenthood, which impelled people to be selfless if not self-sacrificing.

The anti view of the ancient Hindu philosopher, Charvaak, came as a great comfort. Much before the West discovered the free market or any market for that matter, centuries before Adam Smith or even Aristotle was born, the venerable ancient had laid down the hedonistic dictum thus: To enjoy life you need money. To have money, you need

credit. For getting credit, you need creditworthiness. You can not be creditworthy unless you are of righteous conduct. In practice, then, one's conduct was not very different, whether one went after a life of pleasure or of abstinence.

So far as literature is concerned, asceticism and hedonism have long been two opposing watermarks. It has become something of a cliché to say that the Occidental literature has hedonism at its core, whereas Oriental literature is rooted in asceticism. In ancient Indian classics, both were represented with equal passion. On one hand we had Kalidasa and Shudrak celebrating the sensual and the pursuit of happiness; on the other were the *Jatak Kathas* preaching asceticism. But that does not mean that the classics of a much later period from either the West or the East, now called the North and the South were devoid of the spiritual content. Stepping over minor classics of Andre Gide, Milton, Anatole France, Victor Hugo etc from Europe, which concentrated upon the spiritual and the metaphysical, we have to a real Colossus in Dostoevsky's *Brothers Karamazov*. It is the most complete fictional treatise, I know of, which deals with the question of hedonism versus asceticism. It touches on every possible aspect of both as it is lived through to its logical conclusion in the lives of its characters. The lecherous Karamazov pere, the carnal Dmitri, the anarchist intellectual Ivan, the half-witted Smerdyakov, the spiritual Alyosha, the saintly ascetic Father Zossima, the earthy Grushenka, all play their parts in the writer's lab of human emotions to help him reach fathomable and replicable resolutions. But what is the end result after a long, treacherous and complex play of events and emotions in this masterpiece of a novel? Only this that the dilemma between asceticism and hedonism can never be resolved. The only precept we have is that each person has to discover his own 'dharma' and his own destiny.

Strangely enough, despite a hoary tradition of Sringar, that is sensual writing in the Sanskrit and later Hindi literature of medieval India, modern Hindi literature steered clear of it. Perhaps the advent of the British and their Victorian show of prudery had something to do with it. Or it was just a case of swinging from one extreme to the other. Writers who have kept the tradition of hedonism alive in Hindi and Urdu are few and far between. We can name the contemporary novelists like Krishna Baldev Vaid and Manohar Shyam Joshi or the earlier, Bechan Sharma Ugra in Hindi and Manto and Ismat Chughtai in Urdu. Most of the others favour a kind of diluted high mindedness coupled with guilty forays into equally diluted sexual exploits.

There is nothing diluted, however, about the eminent Hindi

novelist, Jainendra's high mindedness. He is a true exponent of the Jain philosophy, which preached that one could achieve nirvana or redemption, only through renunciation and self-laceration. He is one up on all the Andre Gides and Miltons put together. This doyen of modern Indian literature shows in his novels, that all forays in hedonism ultimately end in disillusionment, or worse, in ennui. A hankering for renunciation is felt with the same passionate desire that marks the pursuit of pleasure. His novel Tyagpatra asserts that only asceticism can confer total freedom on an individual. Since he wants nothing, no one can exploit him. Since he has no desires, nothing can hold him in bondage. He is free forever of the tyranny of the market, the dominance of material goods, the emotional hold of relationships and the dictates of society.

My question is, does it really free him or is one tyrant only replaced by another?

Once a social being becomes a declared ascetic, he immediately arouses certain expectations in his fellow human beings. A new set of rules is imposed on an ascetic's conduct, long endorsed by society. The new ascetic is only too eager to bolster them in the beginning and later, there is no escape. Its not easy to opt out of the rules, precisely because they are self-imposed.

The only way to total freedom is to discount the mores practiced by society, whether they relate to consumerism or to asceticism. So what does one do? Retire to the forest or the desert and live a solitary life with no man to make a disciple of. That is not how it has worked through history. Even the Buddha and the Jain Tirthankaras had gone back to the world after gaining enlightenment; to preach their precepts and attract disciples.

As far as literature is concerned, poetry has sometimes concerned itself with a lone man's reflections, without reference to other souls elsewhere. Even fiction has ventured into such interiors of the mind. But we must remember that however much of a loner a writer may want or pretend to be, the very fact that he chooses to publish his work makes him a willing member of society.

According to Milan Kundera, its not only writers, who are not totally free of society. No man is. In his novel, *The Farewell Waltz*, one of his leading character, Bertlef, part saint, part Don Juan, says, the ascetic is not free of the desire for admiration and the greatest pleasure in the world is to be admired. He gives the example of an ascetic, who lives on a small raised platform in the middle of the desert suffering great deprivation and self-laceration. In return he receives the

approbation of millions of people, who hear of his feats of self-denial. And that sustains him and fills him with a pleasure that he can never dream of forgoing. "That tremendous desire for admiration has nothing laughable about it. I find it rather moving. Someone who desires admiration is attached to his fellowmen, he cares about them; he cannot live without them." So, we find that the most detached of men are attached to the rest, in some twisted way or the other.

This precept can perhaps explain the enigma we constantly come across when we study different cultures. We find that Western Christian societies, which display the greatest sexual appetite and self-indulgence, are also the ones, which admire celibacy and attach the greatest possible value to nuns and priests. On the other hand, societies, which place a great store by material goods, are the ones, which are most impressed by renunciation and abstinence. People always are in awe of someone able to give up something, they themselves consider of paramount importance. This is certainly true of India and perhaps of other eastern lands too, which are otherwise celebrated for their spirituality.

Perhaps it is the ascetic who is the ultimate hedonist and asceticism nothing but a distilled form of hedonism. The ascetic wants nothing. Most people have nothing. What the ascetic wants is easy to get because that is what most people have. There is a lot that they want but cannot have any of it. The ascetic is the only one who actually enjoys the pleasure of getting what he wants. Is that not the ultimate goal of hedonism? Pleasure unlimited. Zero and infinite thus become one.

An interesting question is, what effect has the Euro-centrist thinking, which permeates the entire world today, has had on the question of asceticism and hedonism and how has that, in turn, shaped the making of modern and post-modern literature? Has the feverish haste of acquiring and partaking of consumer goods in the wake of global consumerism resulted in making hedonism, the central principle of literature? I feel, it has, to a large extent. Individual freedom, multiple choices of action, violent protection of territory, sexual permissiveness, celebration of the body are the integral components of modern day literature; whereas patriotism, idealism, renunciation etc are, at best, subjects fit for comedy or soap opera.

Ironically or perhaps predictably, the no holds barred materialism and attendant demystification of age-old values has spawned a preoccupation with the super natural phenomena, cults, and a study of cultures, still practicing self-denial. It seems the dilemma between the lure of asceticism and the pursuit of hedonism can never be resolved in literature. And why should it be? The purpose of literature, after

all, is to raise questions and fan doubts, rather than aim at a universal resolution in one direction.

If I look at my own literary work dispassionately, I find that I actually revel in the dilemma and its non-resolution. Though I have often portrayed the sensual part of the individual as important in defining and enriching the essence of life, I have discovered, in the process of writing, that the sensual being is itself shaped by the cerebral and the spiritual urges.

In my earlier novel *Chittacobra*, I probed the essential dichotomy between the body and the mind. The heroine appeared to celebrate the sensual. But her mind denied it at the very moment when the body was experiencing the orgasm. One moment she was saying, "The body is the music and the dance too is the body. The body is the Lord and the invocation also is the body. The body is the spirit and the ecstasy too is the body. As long as the body is pledged, the heart and the mind are irrelevant. But it is not greedy. As soon as it extracts its due, it lets go." But a moment later, she had this to say. "The darkness of the room was peaceful...what of the body... it went to sleep eventually... always did. But let me first go to the bathroom and wash it all away."

In my latest novel, *Kathgulab* (Country of Goodbyes in the English translation), I have dealt again with the dilemma between sensual pleasure and self-denial. But in it, sorrow plays a definitive role. Unlike the self-laceration practiced by the Jain ascetics, sorrow can come from circumstances, which are beyond our control. Call it fate or coincidence, it makes little difference to the consequent suffering. Yet there's always a small part of it, which continues to be defined by us. What effect sorrow will ultimately have on us, depends upon the intensity of our feelings and our threshold of pain. One of my narrators, Vipin, says, "The revelation of absolute sorrow is like the revelation of god...It is not given to everyone to be a Buddha but anyone can leave the house and become an ascetic."

He is himself an evolved hedonist, always in search of transcendental experiences of beauty. He tries to plot his pursuit of aesthetic pleasure and physical well being by steering clear of the love of women, who have a penchant for selfless and everlasting devotion. He has found by experience that this whole business of everlasting love is a sure source of everlasting sorrow. But his plans fail. He finds himself caught in the very situation, he had made elaborate plans to avoid, throughout his life.

He knows he had erred in thinking he was in perfect control of all the circumstances of his life; that he could plan the whole of it, according to his own precepts. But after all, he laments, what was so

wrong in trying to plan his own life, when he was more than willing to allow others to plan theirs without interference. "I was not afraid of the cycle of pain and pleasure. I was afraid of the mystique, which gave an ordinary human being, the power to make sorrow immortal, pure and formless like god and dissolve his whole being in it." What he fails to allow is that no man is an island. He can not rid himself of human relationships just by opting to be free of them. Nor can he mould them in his own image. Every time he meets another individual and establishes a relationship, however brief, he loses some of his power to make a decision by himself. The fact that he is able not only to realize his mistake but once he has fallen into the trap, he had planned to avoid; he has the insight to know that the rest of his life was going to be totally different.

He is the first to concede then that sorrow is something one does not choose, it just happens like ecstasy or death and when it happens it has the same effect as renunciation by one's own choice. In other words, an ascetic is no different from a grieving hedonist, if the grief is of a magnitude that surpasses his greatest moment of ecstasy.

It is then that he cries out in wonder as much as in
self-realization,

I did not choose to live
The omniscient doomed me to life
He who calls himself the ultimate guru
Know that I have usurped your knowledge
You cannot tempt me with eternal peace and joy
I already possess the secret of eternity
Absolute, pure, constant, infinite sorrow.

In tracing the life and time of my own protagonist I made the discovery that true asceticism meant that the essential hedonist had arrived at a point, where he had nothing to wait for. Not to wait meant not to hope or plan for the future and that meant not to want anything. Not wanting was what asceticism was all about. Only a hedonist could feel pain with such intensity that he could make it the medium of his salvation and become an ascetic.

Is the ascetic then the ultimate hedonist or the hedonist destined to become the true ascetic because of the very intensity of feeling, which makes him an evolved hedonist, in the first place? To cut a long story short, we can safely say that in the ultimate analysis, asceticism and hedonism are two sides of the same coin.

□

While embarking on the hitherto unattempted project of writing an integrated history of Indian literature, late Professor Sisir Kumar Das declared, "A history of Indian literature is a long desideratum and our task is to make it possible. Undoubtedly the task is enormous: the corpus is too wide and diverse, languages involved are too many and difficulties numerous, some of them almost insurmountable in the present state of our knowledge.... Nonetheless the writing of a history of Indian literature cannot be postponed indefinitely and a beginning has to be made."

He made the beginning in 1991, by publishing the first volume covering the period from 1800 to 1910, giving it a sub-title "Western Impact: Indian Response". Four years later in 1995, he followed it up with the next volume covering the period from 1911 to 1956, calling it "Struggle for Freedom: Triumph and Tragedy." If the first volume consisted of 815 pages, the second had 908. Unfortunately, the great scholar passed away while he was working on the literary history of our vast medieval period (500-1399 A.D.). Sahitya Akademi decided to publish the first draft of his text, albeit without his characteristically vast repertory of notes and annotations which were yet to be prepared. We sent this volume to two of our outstanding scholars, Professor Amiya Dev and Professor Alok Rai for review articles so that we can begin a seminar in the pages of our journal. The articles follow. Readers are invited to send in their reactions to these articles and/or opinions on the important issue of an integrated history of Indian literature.

Ed.

Apropos Sisirda

Alok Rai

It is a strange experience writing on Sisir Kumar Das's last, posthumously published work, the volume of the *History of Indian Literature* dealing with the period 500-1399 : *From the Courty to the Popular*. I did not have the privilege of knowing Sisirda well. But I knew him enough to realize that here was someone I should try to know better: the gentlest of men, a scholar who carried his immense stock of learning with a miraculous lightness, someone who was a storehouse of precise and often recondite knowledge. Reading this volume, cold, is a poor fulfillment for that unrealized intention. Still, the best way we can honour him is to take his ideas — and, indeed, ideas in general — seriously. And one of the most daring of those was his undertaking a history of Indian Literature, no less. (But one can hardly proceed in this direction without immediately calling to mind another remarkable man who is also, alas, no more. Sujit Mukherjee, along with Sisir Kumar Das, practically invented the field — or, at the very least, demarcated it in crucial ways. Thus, while we may delight in the magnificent volumes put out by the Sahitya Akademi, we should also attend to the warning signs that both of them erected on the boundaries of that field.

One temptation, of course, is to drop the idea of such a literary history of India altogether. The idea of literary history as such is in bad odour internationally. People are suspicious of grand narratives. The anarchic jostling of local particularities is all that one may, fashionably, notice — and then keep noticing, again and again, *ad nauseum*, because there is nothing more to be said. Or, rather, what there is to be said requires the recognition of pattern, structure, process. I am referring, of course, to the postmodern carnival of nonsense. Not just plain old nonsense, of course, this one is philosophically grounded in

the claim or assumption that the aspiration to making sense is itself insidious, poisoned with the hubris of the Enlightenment, totalitarian in tendency if not in intent. (The trouble is that this is, sometimes, true...)

In any case, the evident and even flagrant diversity of India seems tailor-made for a postmodern copout—so that one may talk about the many literatures of India, delighting in the plurality, wary of all longings towards the singularization of this plurality, such as in the expression “Indian Literature”. And indeed — as both Sisir Kumar Das and Sujit Mukherjee have alerted us — there are good reasons for this wariness. But the longing to be able to talk about “Indian Literature” as such, the recurrent feeling that there is a real if recondite subject out there, the sheer heft and ambition of Sisir Kumar Das’s magnificent, magisterial volumes, the heady arrogance that underlies the tantalizing uncertainty of Iqbal’s oft-quoted line — *kuchh baat hai ki basti mit-ti nabin bamaari* — all this too must be given its due. But this mysterious *kuchh baat*, this *je ne sai quoi* must be approached with a proper sense of the difficulty, the gravity of what one is essaying.

The previous history of this field — history of Indian Literature — offers numerous instances of ways in which this difficulty has been sought to be evaded. Thus, there is dogmatic assertion: Indian Literature is one, though it is written in many languages; many flowers, but one plant; diverse plants, one underlying soil... Then there is the Orientalists’ “resolution” of the difficulty. Thus, Weber acknowledges that there is more, even to ancient Indian Literature, than Sanskrit — but then declares that he will, however, write only about Sanskrit but will, “for reasons of brevity... retain the name ‘Indian Literature’.” Winternitz, again, acknowledges that the appellation “Indian” is essentially geographical—the literature that happens in “a land which reaches from the Hindu Kush to Cape Comorin...” But having acknowledged the formidable diversity of “this great, original and ancient literature,” Winternitz decides to navigate this “ocean of uncertainty” on a ship of Sanskrit, Pali and Prakrit. This telescopic foreshortening — this flattening out of diversity and difference — is easier from a distance, whether physical, as in the case of the Orientalists—some of whom never even visited the East — or from a distance in time — i.e. in writing about misty, ancient periods. If, indeed, one confines oneself to Orientalists talking about the glories of Vedic Sanskrit, then the whole and necessary problematic of “Indian Literature”, simply fades away.

Sisir Kumar Das (and Sujit Mukherjee) were both acutely conscious of retaining and working with this sense of the difficulty of

the enterprise—even of its possible impossibility, and not only for physical reasons—just as they were convinced of the necessity of undertaking it. In fact, even the titles of Sujit Mukherjee's books on the subject carry this message of engaged tentativeness: *Towards a Literary History of India*; *Some Positions on a Literary History of India*; *The Idea of An Indian Literature*. An exemplary, hardworking life, dedicated to prolegomena, preliminary considerations: an example indeed to the fools and knaves who rush into this particularly inviting field.

Sisir Kumar Das, on the other hand, is magisterial, generous in his poised, classical certainty—and while I value and admire this greatly, I suggest also that this appearance of certainty is also misleading. He knows what he knows — thank God! — but he does not pretend to certainties where none are available and, indeed, alerts us to the dangers of pretending to dubious certainties in such a domain. The true scholar, as distinct from the lying politician, knows also that he does not know what he does not know—which may often be that which cannot, in the nature of the case, be known with certainty. And this, really, is the hard part—to stay with the difficulty, to keep the question open, to keep thinking.

The singularisation of India's cultural plurality has been attempted in different ways, and for different reasons—reasons both good and, we can hardly be unaware, bad. There have been examples of Orientalist foreshortening, and of voluntarist, "utopian" crystallizations of a "felt community" that underlies, it is hoped, the manifest diversity in the manner of, say, Nehru's *Discovery*. There is also, let's name it, the majoritarian poisoning of this entire domain by assuming, and asserting, that one particular strand of this diversity is "essentially Indian". In his gentle way, Sisir Kumar Das pointed towards this larger phenomenon when, in his "Prologue", he distinguished his enterprise from "the pernicious political ideology that identifies one of the Indian traditions as national and everything else as regional"—or, in other words now, as alien, or folk, or tribal—anything but national.

Leon J. Goldstein, writing in *New Literary History* 8:2 in Winter 1977, warned against the possible infection of, and appropriation by 'Indian nationalism' of such an enterprise. (He was writing apropos one of the Mukherjee volumes.) The warning is prescient, when one considers the antics of our so-called "cultural nationalists", whose acquaintance with any culture is minimal, and who pose a danger to the continuity of the nation itself. But it is important to remember that just because some people give pernicious answers—and, to be fair, they give different answers in different places to the question of what is

“essentially Indian”, they say different things in Rampur and in Baroda! —but the question itself is an important one. The domain of enquiry that it indicates is valuable—but its very existence depends on the fact of the fundamental question being kept open, always open to further interrogation.

Writing in *Vagartba* in April 1973, Sisir Kumar Das had distanced himself from any suspicion of “literary patriotism,” and insisted that his, as it turned out, lifelong engagement with “the idea of an Indian literature”—the singularisation of its evident diversity—was driven not by any sense of “political necessity”. “To be significant as a literary conception and worthy of scholarly pursuit,” he wrote, “it must have literary justifications.”

It is important to remember that Sisir Kumar Das’s lifelong engagement with the idea of an “Indian Literature” was driven by a kind of heuristic intent. A possible Indian Literature provided the scholar with a comparativist framework within which the play of similarity and difference in the vaunted carnival of diversity — in which everything is itself and itself only — could be brought to mind, and thought about. This comparatist framework is not some multicultural carnival, in which diverse, discrete things exist without engaging with each other. It is, in contrast, an intellectual device, a working hypothesis, which is there precisely to enable research, controversy, discussion. It is inspired, ideally, by the democratic hope that such a cultural conversation is a necessary part of the always-unfinished project of Indian modernity. The quest for a possible Indian literature is, in other words, part of the process of achieving what a leading social scientist described as “a possible India”.

After the first two volumes, which dealt with the modern period, this present posthumous volume drops back several centuries, spanning a period from 500 AD to 1399 AD. (This leaves a hole from 1400 AD to 1800 AD which will, alas, forever remain unaddressed by Sisirda.) It is difficult to get a sense of the status of this present volume. Thus, the Foreword informs us that among the posthumous papers, there was found a first draft of this volume. The present, posthumous volume is, in effect, an uncorrected version of the first draft. There is certain value in being allowed access to the initial formulations of such a distinguished scholar, even when one thinks that some of those formulations might not have survived into the later drafts. Consider, for

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instance, this remark from the first chapter, 'The Foundations of Medieval Indian Literature': "The effects of Muslim invasion in different parts of the country were certainly quite significant but there is hardly any trace of the ravages caused by a hostile army in any literature of the period." The last paragraph of the same chapter alludes to the existence of "an 'imagined history' that regulated the Indian creative mind.... It is not that the creative writers were not concerned about the present but they refused to be the prisoners of temporality. They were more concerned about the human conditions (sic) in general rather than the specifics. They wrote with a sense of unfragmented time ever flowing and renewing itself, where the present was only a tiny part." But in an India where perversely imagined histories have wreaked so much havoc, and where the hardy myth of "Muslim" tyranny continues to do its poisonous work, one can hardly notice the *absence* of any literary echo and leave it at that. I like to believe that the Sisirda I never really got to know, would have told me somewhat more in the later drafts. Or edited this out. Quite apart from its problematic status as an uncorrected first draft, there is a further difficulty with the volume. It has apparently been worked up from handwritten pages—thus, on p.61, "imitative" has become "initiative". There are numerous other traces of shaky editing, which does a disservice to the very substantial scholarship that is still available in these pages.

It is of course in the nature of an enterprise such as this, that there should be extensive reliance on secondary sources. Thus, for instance, my own understanding of the cultural matrix of Bhakti was very substantially enlarged by the account of its Tamil antecedents. The sheer preponderance and centrality of the epics, the fact that the Rama and Krishna legends have been visited and revisited countless times, have provided a stable context of signification for a cultural dialogue extending over millennia, this too is brought home powerfully. There are hints of other tendencies also, particularly in the penultimate chapter entitled "Developments in Modern Indian Languages"—Chapter XI. Thus, one notices "local cults and regional traditions", and also the "spread of sufism", that further amalgam in the amalgam of Bhakti. But by now one is clearly on the edge of that next, unwritten, volume—but wonders also, why and whether it was that the local and the regional had to wait for the advent of modernity in order to find expression. Or, are we dealing with a kind of cultural filtering, an

archival absence, in that only that was recorded which was deemed worthy of recording?

Then again, the Jain canon is an important repository of the cultural life of this period, and it is a matter of gratitude that it has been brought into view even for people who have no access to the originals. Of course, reading literary extracts in English has a predictable flattening effect. But what is rather more upsetting is the reliance on mostly Western scholarship. After all, there should have been an extensive Indian tradition of monographic scholarship by now. Clearly those "human conditions" of the Introduction continue to occupy our scholars too, beyond the appeal of mere historical, local particularity!



A History of Indian Literature: 500-1399

Amiya Dev

A distinction is often made between literary history and the history of literature, with the data gathering and the chronology assigned to the latter, and a sense of the deep structure to the former. And it is implied that the latter is hack while the former is insight. Of course the mere fact ranging is not history, but no deep structure can be sounded without facts. In other words the 'literary historian' cannot do without the 'historian of literature'. They better be the same person. Sisir Kumar Das, our author, was both. This is his third volume for the integrated history of Indian literature he had mooted for the Sahitya Akademi. In the earlier volumes, covering 1800-1910 and 1911-1956, he had two separate parts of similar length, one dealing with the data and the dates, the other with the structures underlying them. If we so wish we may call them the 'history of literature' and the 'literary history' of the period, but by yoking them under *A History of Indian Literature* Sisir Kumar Das had implied their interdependence or, perhaps, disregarded the nicety of their difference, or even perhaps, considered it a superfluity. The more immediate challenge to him was that of integration, of how to handle so many literatures together without merely aggregating them and without doing any damage to their individualities. And there his success was phenomenal, worthy of being a model to any multilingual literary history.

In the present volume he has not separated the data and the structures but put them together, the reasons for which are understandable. For this was the time when the bulk of the modern Indian languages were taking their final shape, and a data-chart from individual literatures would not have yielded much. Besides the dates in most cases were uncertain. The only literature that had by then attained a history

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 was Tamil, in addition of course to the Sanskrit, Pali, Prakrit and Apabhramsa. Whether or not we designate the volume medieval or early medieval, Sisir Kumar Das does not highlight the *bhasha* literatures alone, medieval Tamil included, playing down the classical ones. Apart from the other things, a good deal of Sanskrit was written in this period and though small, a part of the Pali canon. As to the Prakrit, the bulk belonged to this period, minus of course the lost *Brhatkatha* and the parts written for the preceding drama in Sanskrit. And as to the Apabhramsa, this was its period.

The volume has twelve chapters. The first deals with the foundations of medieval Indian literature in terms of the period as such, the languages in use, author-audience-patron relations, the carry-over of classical roots, dominant philosophical systems, the polyphony of belief, and the Muslim influence—in other words, the perspectives to view the literature. The other chapters are each devoted to a principal aspect. Tamil *bhakti* comes first, as seen in the Saiva Nayanmars and the Vaishnava Alwars, popular saints driven by a divine ecstasy and filling up the temple yards with their songs—comprising the major canons, *Tevaram* and *Divya Prabandham*, respectively. Then there is something far from that, a gift of the court, Sanskrit drama after Kalidasa, featuring Harsa, Bhavabhuti, Visakhadatta and others, showing an eventual decline and a turn to the popular theatre. The post-Kalidasa epic or *mahakavya* comes next, as also the Tamil epic after *Shilappadikaram* and *Manimekhalai*; the history-semblable, its prime examples being *Harsacarita* and *Rajatarangini*; hagiographies towered over by the Tamil *Periya Puranam*; and finally, the Saiva poems in Telugu. In the same vein is the chapter on prose narratives or *gadyakavyas*, reaching heights in *Dasakumaracarita* and *Kadambari*; tale clusters like *Pancatantra* and *Kathasaritsagara*; the Jain *kathas* in Prakrit or Apabhramsa; *campus*; and short verses, Amaru and Bhartrihari's *Satakas* for instance and anthologies like *Subhasita Ratnavali* and *Prakerta Paingala*. The chapters next to it deal, first, with the various *Ramayanas*, the Jain *Ramayanas* in particular, written as much in Prakrit and Apabhramsa as in Sanskrit; and, second, with recreations of the great epics, focusing the Tamil *Kamba-Ramayana*, an instance of the Southern Rama-*bhakti*, and Madhava Kandali's *Ramayana* in Assamese, as well as Nannaya's Telugu *Mahabharata* and the Kannada *Pampa-Bharata*. We then have a chapter, the eighth, on the medieval non-conformists—the Tamil Siddhars of Saiva origin, the Buddhist Sahajiyas famous for their *charyapadas* and the Buddhist Siddhas for their *dobas*, and the Kannad Virasaivas of *vachana* fame (with details on Vasavanna). The

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ninth chapter takes us apropos Krishna and Radha to the *Bhagavata Purana* and *Gita Govinda*, especially in view of the absolute hold of the former over medieval Vaishnavism and the excellence of the latter as a love poem of *double entendre* and its transition between the late Sanskrit and the early MIL. In the tenth and eleventh chapters, we have a focus respectively on the innovations and developments in MIL, the thrusts being on the Gujarati and Marathi beginnings; the cult of Vitthala at Pandharpur; *Jñaneswari*; Kashmir's Lal Ded of *vakh* fame; oral *vachanas* bearing popular wisdom (Bengali and Tamil); emerging genres like the *parani* and *raso*; local cults; further beginnings (Assamese and Kannada); the Sufi impact and the spread of Sufism. The last chapter is on the spaces inside medieval Indian literature meaning the court and the temple, the latter leading to the two principal images of divinity, the Nataraja Siva and Krishna playing on his magic flute.

This to be sure is short shrift to the rich contents of Sisir Kumar Das's third volume of *A History of Indian Literature*. There is no dearth of deep structure here, but there is no dearth of data either. The latter presuppose a scholarship that is getting rare and rarer. A quick look at his bibliography shows the extent of the reading he had done. In our hurry to get to theory and build a construct of our own, we often rationalize our reading. Besides there is the problem of imbalance, in order to highlight one we often play down another. Sisir Kumar Das was not unresponsive to theory. He had even an ideology in respect of popular literature. His subtitle too is: 'from the courtly to the popular'. But that did not mean that he would not give the courtly its due. He even spoke of the classical heritage of medieval literature. His handling of the late Sanskrit, often alongside classical Tamil or the Prakrit and Apabhramsa writing, is not hurried. Yet it is when he speaks of the Nayanmars and Alwars, with individual reference and illustrations from the poetry, or of the Siddhas and Sahajiyas and Virasaivas, or of Radha and Krishna, or of Lal Ded the mad lover that he seems nearer his elements. We may be reminded here of the slim book he had put together in 1984 (*The Mad Lover*, Papyrus) containing four essays: 'The Mad Lover', 'Religious Emotion and Poetic Form', 'The Mystic Eros' and 'Radha, a Mad Lover'. He has a number of other essays on medieval genres and themes anticipating a part of the thrust in the present volume. Besides, there are hints in them as to what he would have said in the subsequent volume on medieval Indian literature. It is an irreparable loss that he will not write it.

At the end of his narrative part in *A History of Indian Literature*

1911-1956 (Sahitya Akademi, 1995), he seemed to be asking himself: Is the India he is writing about known to all Indians everywhere, even in the remotest corners? In other words, does everyone everywhere know that he or she is an Indian, even an unlettered tribal girl in a village stuck away in the midst of nowhere? Sisir Kumar Das's cue was a conversation from Bibhutibhushan Bandyopadhyay's novel *Aranyak* (1939) where Bhanumati says that she hasn't heard of Bharatvarsha. Where does it lie, how does one get there? Sisir Kumar Das's gloss is worth recalling. "The two characters participating in the dialogue belong to two cultural zones, carrying different perceptions of history ... one describes his country—*desa* as 'Bharatvarsha', which does not even exist in the knowledge of the other." Hence "what is revealed through constant exploration...is a diverse India, composed of many races, many civilizations, many regions, and many languages. The discovery of each part only leads to the exploration of the other (pp 418-19)." This should have answered any doubts any of us might have entertained about even the partial non-inclusiveness of his material in the preceding volumes. 'Indian literature' to him had not been authoritative, a site of power. On the contrary, it was an ever-widening category, an umbrella as it were, to provide a space under to any strand that was around. It could very well be that not every single strand was located—there was also the limiting factor of the Sahitya Akademi recognized languages alone being considered. That task, he would say, lies with the future historian, provided the principle of an integrated history is accepted, no matter how different in execution.

He seemed to have called it a day while waiting for other historians. But medieval Indian literature would probably have gone on waiting if he had not been persuaded to resume work. True he only wrote the first draft covering the first period, and that too without a preface and an epilogue—his usual practice—but what has come down to us is complete enough an account. Of course the epilogue would have put the strands together and given us a conclusion, comparable to the ones in the preceding volumes. He does speak at the outset of the sacred geography prevalent at the time of rivers, mountains and temples, and of the great epics and the Puranas, giving a sense of cohesion, but nothing obviously of the order of the nation-state that would apply later in the twentieth century and as a critique of which had come his perception on Bharatvarsha. Sisir Kumar Das was far from yielding to a nationalist persuasion insisting on crass unity in every respect. His Indian literature was not thrust from above, but built from

below where thrived a veritable polyphony. He would probably not more agree with the official Sahitya Akademi motto, 'Indian literature is one though written in many languages', than with its seeming obverse, 'Indian literature is one because it is written in many languages'. And he would surely add a number of other variants, region for instance, and, for medieval Indian literature, religion.

□

BOOK REVIEWS

India's Shakespeare: Translation, Interpretation and Performance ed. by Poonam Trivedi and Dennis Bartholomeusz, New Delhi, Longman/Pearson, 2005, Pp. 270

The volume, edited by Poonam Trivedi and Dennis Bartholomeusz, consists mostly of papers given at a seminar on 'Shakespeare and India', organized by the Shakespeare Society of India, Delhi, conjointly with Delhi University's English Department. The Society some time ago brought out a useful annotated check-list of Shakespeare performances and adaptations in some Indian languages. The present collection offers a probing study of the performances and adaptation, and translation of Shakespeare in India. The essays together bring out not only the pervasive though not exactly dominant presence of Shakespeare in the Indian theatre of different streams but also the amazing range and variety of the adaptations in different regions and, at the same time, the abiding unity of the approaches and attitudes governing the understanding and reception of Shakespeare. Most of the essays adopt the perspective and terminology of postcolonial criticism.

Poonam Trivedi's well-informed and illuminating introduction suggests that 'Shakespeare was introduced to India via the stage': (p. 31) True, the plays were given on the Calcutta stage by the Company folks as early as the mid-eighteenth century. But clearly it was through the classroom and curricular and non-curricular study in schools and colleges, and through the discourse of the educated classes that Shakespeare for generations came to be propagated and his influence percolated to various levels. The essays between them, harp on what can be variously described as the trans-culturalisation, Indianisation, indigenisation, localisation, appropriation or reappropriation, acculturation or acclimatization or fresh valorization of Shakespeare in Indian culture or the cultures of the different regions, based on the changes made in translation or adaptation in play titles, character names, locales and allusions to mythology or social events. But it is natural enough for the translator or adapter to practise this. Dennis Bartholomeusz remarks on the

localization of Shylock's shoes, in his study of a production of *The Merchant of Venice* in Calcutta in 1996, saying that the gorgeousness of Shylock's shoes set him apart as a Muslim among Hindus, thus suggesting a transformation of the Jew-Christian polarity in the play into Muslim vs. Hindus. We remember that Pammal Samtanda Mudaliar the pioneer translator and performer of Shakespeare on the Tamil stage (nineteenth and early twentieth centuries) made Shylock a Jain and set the play in a period in Tamil history of bitter hostility and rivalry between Jain and Hindu, as did some Hindi translators in the nineteenth century.

There are occasional insights, for instance on how in a Hindi film version of *The Comedy of Errors*, the romance and New Comedy convention recognition could be coolly and subtly undercut as Rajiva Verma points out (pp. 246-247) on the Hindi film versions of some Shakespeare plays. Similarly Debjani Sengupta in her paper on the Bengali actresses on the Shakespearean stage of the late nineteenth century, interestingly points out (p. 218) that the appearance of amateur ladies, first white and then Indian, belonging to the higher classes, led to the emergence of professional actresses in female roles thither to played only by men in the public theatres. In the old Sanskrit theatre the *natis* or actresses were in evidence, but in the later centuries women participation in acting on the public stage came to be considered taboo. Paradoxically, at the same time, it was held in certain quarters that crossdressing, and impersonation of the other sex, was held sinful; this was a specific exclusive privilege reserved for certain particular temple ritual performances. The situation was ripe at the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth centuries for women playing women's roles, and the change was gradual in the south, though women appeared on the Parsi stage of the late nineteenth century in Bombay. The late Professor S.K. Das's essay provides a succinct critique of translation of Shakespeare in some Indian languages.

Two essays though not precisely on the book's theme, are good value. Sukanta Chaudhuri offers a penetrating analysis of Shakespeare's references to 'India' and shows how 'India was part of his imaginative geography, a country of the mind, no matter whether the reference was to the East or West Indies or India or America. R.W. Desai presents the fascinating argument that the quarrel between O bean and Titanic refracts and reinfects the rivalry between England and Spain and Portugal (which two were under common rule) over the spice trade with India dominated at the time by Portugal. He pertinently emphasizes that the ambition of England then was one of trade and commerce and not of imperial colonizing.

The essays show how the Shakespeare plays have been presented as Bengali *jatras*, as Marathi *Sangita-natakas* (and earlier as musical drama in the Bombay Parsi theatre), or in the Kerala *Kathakali* form, and as Kannada *Yaksha-ganas*. Mnouchkine the innovative French producer-director presented Shakespeare adopting *Kathakali* elements as early as the early eighties. The question arises, however, whether *Kathakali* or *Sangita-nataka* can be docketed as 'folk theatre'. Postmoderns have a habit of positing a rather too facile and hard and fast distinction between folk and classical, between common and courtly, between popular and learned in regard to Indian art forms or those of Shakespeare's England, owing to a failure or refusal to recognize the relative cultural unity amidst social differences of the times. *Kathakali* and *Sangita-nataka* are marked by an interpenetration between classical and popular.

The emphasis in the papers seems to be on the 'alternative dramatic logic' of such productions. However, beside the alterity of the tradition, the relationship is perhaps more dialogic than adversarial. Rather, it is the common link of non-realist, non-illusionistic principles and stage-practices between Indian theatre and Elizabethan drama, how it may help promote our response to the drama, needs emphasis. Moreover, resistance is inbuilt in Shakespeare. If Shakespeare was touted as an imperialist signal, in actual effect the reading of Shakespeare provoked resistance to and revolt against, foreign domination. Shakespeare, first and in prime fashion, deconstructs himself, so we may say.

Perhaps more attention to the Tamil and Telugu stages (and modern Hindi drama) would have added to the comprehensiveness of the book. Also, some indication would have been in place of the influence of Shakespeare on Indian literatures and on poetic playwrights such as Sri Aurobindo and Tagore (Tagore said, 'Shakespeare is our dramatic ideal'.) whatever may be T.S. Eliot's anxieties of such influence on writers in general. A few misprints like 'harrass' (p. 73) and 'raproachment' (p.164) are traced. The reference to S. Sarma's Tamil film should be 'S. Sama's *Shylock* (1940) (p. 254). Serukalathur Sama was a talented, minor character actor. The volume takes its place as an indispensable book on its fertile but heady theme.

S. Vishawanathan

Dear Jester and Other Stories by J P Das, Rupa and Co., Pp.181, Rs.195.

Dear Jester and Other Stories is a collection of short stories written by J P Das, the eminent playwright, fiction writer and art historian. Translated from Oriya by Rabindra K Swain and Paul St. Pierre, the stories capture what D.H Lawrence would call the "Shimmeriness of life." These stories are like meandering journeys into the alleys of the interior, capturing the numerous dimensions of life. Each story tells itself in a very concentrated form. The open-endedness of the narratives discourages passive consumption of the stories. Narration is grounded in its milieu but also transcends it. The translator, in the *Introduction* says that the common thread that connects the stories is the confrontation of 'Reality' and 'Illusion'. This perhaps is a partial statement Reality and Illusion in the stories fuse, overlap, intersects and blends. They do not exist as mere binaries but flow in and out of the narratives in various patterns, making the stories complex and pregnant.

Various configurations that the self and relationships take are what the stories are about. Stories portray individuals and relationships at crucial moments of transition, confrontation or recognition. Wrapped in a cloud of illusions, the protagonists move through the flux and flow of life. Caught in the twilight zone of doubts, they wait for their epiphanic moments. Interrogating the very act of living, the stories move within the realm of the real and the surreal. Life, they show, is complex—choices difficult, dilemmas multiple and desires pressing. The stories portray small situations, ordinary moments, and ordinary lives—yet, 'small is significant'.

"The Illusions of Success" is the story of Tarapad and Sukhada. If Sukhada lives in her chosen orbit and basks in the glory of her success, Tarapad forges frames of greatness and tries to wriggle into them. There is a lurking dignity in his indignity. And this is what perhaps makes him human. "Our Daughter's Wedding" raises uncomfortable truths about oppressive relationships. The parents have to, as a frustrated last resort, conjure up consolations for themselves. "The Intimate Stranger" questions the whole idea of 'complete' understanding between two people. Ramnath feels that he had 'never known' his wife, Seema at all. Like Tagore's story "Kabulliwalah", "The Soldier", is the story of a soldier, who returns home after a long time to find his wife estranged. "The outsider" views symbiotic relationships as exploitative and ex-

plores the micro-politics of everyday life. "Radha", explores the limits of freedom in relationships. "Homecoming" problematizes the very concept of 'home' of 'roots', of 'belonging'.. "Homeless" is the story about struggle to live—to live the 'ordinariness' of life. Another deeply disturbing story that makes a powerful political comment is "The Ultimatum". The two politicians fall into the narrow pit of self-interest, shunning all idealism.

The title story "Dear Jester" is a very significant story. It delineates the dilemmas of the writer—diminished creativity, eroding inspiration and waning success. And of course the perennial dilemma of a writer (more so of a *Bhasha* writer)—as Tarapad in "The Illusions of Success", says "to judge a writer's merit, one has first of all to decide what yardstick to use." The story explores the relationship of the writer to his characters, to the nature of reality, and to the world of imagination.

If one has to fault this collection of stories on any point, it probably would be the simplification of words 'Reality' and 'Illusion' as explained in the Introduction by the translator. For a 'cultural insider', these terms /concepts have multiple philosophical and metaphysical connotations. The orchestrations of themes in the stories go much beyond the stated binaries of just 'Reality' and 'Illusion'. The socio-cultural context of the stories, the political overtones prevent them from being just 'metaphysical.' There is a high fidelity to a sense of lived reality. Focusing the reader's attention on these two themes would result in a prescriptive and reduced reading of the otherwise pregnant stories.

One wished the translators could have shared the challenges they faced in the actual process of translation from Oriya to English. As sterile Translation theories and hypothetical discourses on the act of translation multiply meaninglessly—this sharing by the translators would have been very rewarding.

The essence and magic of the stories lies not in the written word, always but in the speaking silence between the words. If Das has captured this in his stories—the translators have been able to transfer it to the translations. An admirable task accomplished, this surely is the triumph of the translations and the translators.

Tania Mehta

My Temporary Son : An Orphan's Journey, by Timeri N. Murari, Penguin Books, Pp. 242, Rs.250/-

It was a veritable minefield with no escape route. No, I am not referring to any war or the strategy of a terrorist outfit. It was an 'emotional minefield' in which Tim Murari found himself trapped. And who had laid this minefield? It was none else but Bhima. It was again not the Bhima of the Mahabharata but, ironically, an undernourished infant brought from an orphanage, born with very serious physical defects denying him even gender identity. The sixty year old Tim and his wife Maureen wanted to cure him and then send him back after a temporary stay. But destiny wished otherwise. The bond of love that developed not only prevented them from sending him back to the orphanage after the successful treatment but also posed a painful hindrance to the eventual parting of ways when the adoptive parents, as pre-arranged, came from abroad to take charge of the child.

In the silent pantomime of the melancholic moment Tim now stared at the emptiness of the future, overwhelmed by the love of the past bringing with it the pangs of separation of the present. In a wishful dialogue with Bhima, he mused,

You will be leaving us very soon. Your destiny is going to carry you away. Is that what you want? ... You didn't choose the parents who abandoned you, now you won't be able to choose the new parents who want you. Is that your destiny at work?

Tim was unable to fathom out the mystery called destiny.

Who had set the destiny in motion? What forces shape our lives? How do they work? It seemed so arbitrary — a chance visit from a few foreign women and his whole life had changed. Was that meant to happen? Was it fore-ordained that a particular time and place should bring his small hopeless life into collusion with total strangers? I am not a practising Hindu, but at times the feeling and sense of karma controlling our lives overwhelms me.

He believed it unfair that he should suffer for things done by someone or something before his life here began. He was sad that Bhima would never understand why his natural parents abandoned him in an orphanage. He was helpless, with no control over his karma.

Luckily for Tim writing was not only his profession but also his therapy. He did not claim that this therapy always worked, but it did lessen the pain, like a temporary palliative. In his belated fatherhood he wanted to recreate his childhood through the child as perhaps all fathers do though the child was not his own, but picked up and taken care of only to be given away. Tim had never been comfortable with children. In fact, he had always kept them at a safe distance. But Bhima proved to be an exception and, in the emotional encounter, transformed him only to go away leaving a doting couple to their cruel fate. This is the overriding sentiment that grips the reader throughout the novel, while unfolding the travails of adoption in all its poignant details.

Raymond Williams, writing on realism in the contemporary novel, prefers to interpret realism in terms of an ordinary, contemporary, everyday reality, as opposed to the traditionally heroic, romantic or legendary subjects. 'It offers a valuing of a whole way of life, a society that is larger than any of the individuals composing it, and at the same time valuing creations of human beings...as absolute ends in themselves.' The insightful narrative, as it unfolds, conforms to this conception wonderfully. The world is actualized in the eyes of the beholder. It is this individual perception at its breaking point when, at one stage, Tim thinks of running away from society, along with Bhima, to somewhere in the Himalayas; a possibility which he knows very well as extremely remote but nevertheless finds solace in indulging in such ruminations. The book is a riveting account of the struggle of an elderly couple, their daily tribulations in trying to normalize an abnormal child in a maze of medical, legal and bureaucratic encounters, only to hand over the child to some other couple after nurturing in him a sense of belonging and undying love, as their age acts as a legal bar to adoption.

The fact that Bhima was a special needs child was the cause of constant concern both for Tim and Maureen after the child had gone abroad with his adoptive parents. Time is not always a healer, 'it merely tucks the pain away into the recesses of memory'. Over the year, if by accident Tim hit his movie-maker there was Bhima, laughing and playing in the garden or in the house. The past could not be

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erased from the memory. And now he kept materializing in their emails and photographs sent by his parents. One of the terms of adoption was that the adoption agency in Europe had to send quarterly reports, with photographs, on Bhima for the first five years, and half-yearly reports thereafter. The reports suggesting that he was fine and was bonding with his parents relieved Tim and Maureen for the time being.

The book is replete with observations on everyday routine experiences and tongue-in-cheek remarks. For instance, 'Indian doctors take great pride in giving appointment times and then keeping patients waiting for hours'. Exasperated by the time consuming process of adoption, the author avers, 'To legally adopt an Indian child, a couple must have infinite patience. A mountain of paperwork has to be scaled, both in India and abroad.' He refers to the five frustrating years trapped in the prevailing judicial system while the total time spent in hearing his case could not have been more than twelve hours. He was evicting three business tenants from his ancestral property in the Court of Small Causes, and it took a whole year before the first hearing of the case could be possible, mainly because of the repeated adjournments caused by the absence of the tenants or their lawyers.

Reverting to the plot, will the deracinated child eventually grow up into a healthy and prosperous man in his new freedom? Perhaps another kind of destiny is lurking somewhere to take charge of the situation which only a subsequent volume could reveal. The author has screenplays and stage plays to his credit apart from novels and non-fictional contributions. His present work is a moving tribute to the people who have the compassion to care for the helpless souls cruelly abandoned to their fate by those who could have been dearest to them. It is an appeal to the readers not to ignore the plight of the helpless and the unfortunate victims of society. The guidelines to the procedural steps for adoption, in the form of appendices at the end of the text, have been thoughtfully incorporated.

M.N. Chatterjee

Without Margins by Sukrita, Bibliophile South Asia, 2005, Pp.116, Rs.150/-

What I found most striking at the very first glance of Sukrita's books of poems is its title and the pencil art of its cover. To be honest the title 'Without Margins' as well as the pencil art done on the cover; depicting an earthen pitcher (possibly empty) held in place by a lone hand lend a touch of mystery and intrigue to the book. It goes without saying that, Sukrita is an accomplished poet and critic with several collection of poetry and critical works to her credit. A participant of Iowa International writing programme, her critical works include *Men, Women and Androgyny*; *The New Story* and *Narrating Partition*. *Without Margins* is her fourth and most recent collection of poems.

As for the themes they could be anything from the experience of first love, relationship with all its myriad colours and shades, distance, generation gap, memories to rootlessness, dislocation, angst, concern for the homeless etc. crystallized deftly from a variety of realizations and experience. The overall tone of the poems range from meditative and reflective to intensely sombre bearing all along a surrealistic style of expression which impresses and baffles the reader at the same time.

In her bid to understand and make sense of the complex and chaotic world around herself she throws up a dilemma both at herself and the reader. In a self interrogative tone she wonders:

As if an earthquake
Always happens elsewhere;
As if the pond here
Will forever be still
And as if
the lotuses with
their mouths open
will forever
gape at the skies

(What if)

Each poet worth his salt dreams of a better and humane world who gets hurt badly each time an innocent life, however small and insig-

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nificant ends abruptly (read brutally). No poet can afford to sit silent with the disturbing images of communal riots in Gujarat and the bloodbath that followed hunting him all the time. A precarious time in the life of a humanity when even the mother's womb was no longer safe:

The unborn Gujarat
The fetus
with half-formed eyes
and deep wounds
Gaping from the
ripped belly of the
woman
Wrapped in haloes of
bloody tales;

(The Hunt)

As life gets increasingly brutalized, it is the poet who must raise his voice and speak out at the powers that be.

Sukrita's vast poetic landscape ranges from the narrow confines of domesticity to international border-crossing; from Mirza Ghalib's Delhi to Chicago and Iowa where she dwells effortlessly between peoples, continents and cultures. One could see how a casual look at her daughter's wardrobe sets the poet into a reflective mode. She watches her daughter slowly growing into adolescence as she gets ready to break free from 'old clothes' and 'old parents'. The juxtaposed images of 'old clothes' and 'old parents' is strongly evocative:

innocence lying
crouched and discarded
in rolled up garments
too small for her now;

(Mothers and Daughters)

A daughter walking slowly into womanhood fills the mother with both happiness and apprehensions:

A full bud now,
ready to burst and
express herself
through menstruation
and breasts
a body

twisting and turning
into new forms

(Mothers and Daughters)

Poetry is an inward journey undertaken by the poet to search for her ownself, an attempt to 'locate the centre of her being' to look for order and meaning in the chaos of life. The poet looks at herself from a distance and has this to say;

Often, I step out of
Myself
To watch, observe and
Follow her —
She,
Who is perpetually trampling
On a bed of thorns
With bloody, red sores on the
Soles of her feet.

(Seasonal Sadness)

No ornamentations, no verbosity, the words seemed to have come straight from the dark depths of the heart without much of a chiseling, honing or craft—honest and true to the feelings in all its rawness.

Quite a few of her poems successfully capture the seamy side of 'Relationship'—with all its pulls, pressures, intricacies, tensions, upheavals and pangs of growing up:

I hate your manhood,
the affinities;
my son,
can you be seven again?
Seven, when the earth
between us
had not cracked yet.

(Fathers & Sons)

There are 'short takes' such as the one below that works wonderfully as a speck of light in the wilderness of words:

Words as frozen ice
Stuck in the
Throats
Of lovers.

(Breaking Silence)

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However, the weakest link in the chain of poems is the section, 'We, the homeless,' which, I am constrained to say, does not add substantially to the whole effort. The long poem though rich in emotions lacks craft and seems utterly cliché ridden with dull, stereotyped images. The saving grace, however, is :

The sun shines
On his yellow shirt
And butterflies fly out
of his eyes
till he opens his heart
to show the reptiles
gnawing
at his inside

The powerful and strongly evocative image of 'reptiles' symbolizing 'hunger' could also mean 'sexuality'.

Another significant feature of this book is the set of superb paintings interspersed generously over the entire collection of poems revealing yet another dimension of her persona; though, at times one tends to feel that the painter in her has overtaken the poet. On the whole, produced artistically, Sukrita's *Without Margin's* deserves to be read by all who have a panache for good poetry.

Durga Prasad Panda

Black Rose and Other Stories by Pradip Khandwalla, New Delhi, Sanbun Publishers, 2005, Pp.152, Rs.150/-

There is a growing interest in the activity of translation in Gujarat. In fact, Gujarat has a fairly large corpus of works translated from one regional language to another—particularly from Bengali to Gujarati, Hindi to Gujarati or for that matter from English to Gujarati. The need for and importance of translations from Gujarati to English is now being increasingly recognised and as a result we see a number of

people engaged in this activity, getting their translations published by Government or private publishers.

Black Rose and Other Stories published by Sanbun Publishers, New Delhi, is a translation of seventeen short stories originally written in Gujarati by Anjali Khandwalla an acclaimed writer of Fiction in Gujarati. The stories are translated by Pradip Khandwalla, Anjali's husband. Reading these stories in the original, one is struck by the sheer variety of narrative forms the writer has employed to produce a collection of stories, some of which can easily stand among the best that Gujarati Literature has. It must have been a formidable task carrying the complex nuances of the source language as also the cultural baggage, on to the target language, specially since the writer juggles with myth, fancy, the realistic and the surrealistic.

"Indubhai's Disappearance," "The Rat in the Broken Bottle," "Non-incarnation," "The Living Mansion" and "Sukhdi" read well in translation and show how deftly handled the techniques of the stories in the original are and also how wide-ranging they are thematically.

While reading the translated stories two questions surfaced. One: Has the fact of the translator being so close to the writer 'being spouses' and 'living under the same roof' (as he says in the Introduction) inhibited his freedom to translate freely and creatively? Two: Does a translation reflect the professional training of the translator? To my mind the translation under review bears the stamp of a person who has had his training in Management Studies. For, while on the one hand Khandwalla brings, precision to his translation — 'dictionary precision' — if one may say so; on the other hand this very precision has led him to the use of some infelicitous words and phrases making the translation sound stilted. While a translator is required to remain faithful to the original work, he has the difficult task of balancing literalness with creativity. Khandwalla has done fairly well in this respect except at a few places where literalness mars the smoothness and fluency of the language. To give a few examples the sentence: 'I used to mitigate the overhang of anxiety by chatting away' in "Telegram" (p. 130) or 'My breath was in a noose' in "Thrashing" (p.150) or 'Eyes began to rummage hurriedly into my prostrate Memory' in "Mahanadi" (p.134) or 'From the dark recesses of his pupils rumbled an ominous cunning' in "Indubhai's Disappearance" (p.36). In all these sentences the translation is exact but gives a false ring because of the use of inflated words.

However, a few such lapses do not take away from the over-all merit of the translation which is both polished and urbane. Mention

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should be made of the foot-notes which will be of great help to the non-Gujarati reader.

Anjali Khandwalla's collection of short stories originally entitled: *Ankh Ni Imarato* (*Edifices of the Eye*) published in 1988 had to wait for seventeen years for a translation in English. Better late than never!

Amina Amin

These Hills Called Home, by Temsula Ao, Penguin Books in collaboration with Zubaan, Pp. 147. Rs 195.

These ten stories are like a three-dimensional mirror to the Naga society. They touch upon almost all aspects of life, and in the process serve as a window to a people whose rites and rituals, customs and traditions, myths and legends, rituals and beliefs, crafts and music have generally been unknown. Almost all the stories are simple, uncomplicated narratives about the Naga way of life. And they are interesting, even when some of them fail to come off as conventional narratives, even when some of them seem overstretched and tend to drag in the process to the extent that they seemingly move away from the contextual. In fact, Temsula Ao spells out her concerns in a brief introduction aptly called *Lest We Forget*, which, indeed, is an important aspect of almost all the narratives.

These stories however, are not about 'historical facts'; nor are they about condemnation, justice or justification of the events which raged through the land like a wildfire half a century ago. On the contrary, what the stories are trying to say is that in such conflicts, there are no winners, only victims and the results can be measured only in human terms. For the victims the trauma goes beyond the realm of just the physical maiming and loss of life—their very humanity is assaulted and violated, and the onslaught leaves the survivors scarred both in mind and soul.

Temsula Ao attempts these narratives like a chronicler, and objectivity is the essence of these ten stories. She takes no sides while dealing with insurgency or armed rebellion, but seeks to present a picture in the backdrop of socio-economic factors. She draws vivid portraits of crimes perpetuated by the armed forces, especially the unforgivable ones against women. And in doing so, she betrays no sympathy for the victim or anger against the aggressor. But the narrative says it all in an effective, telling fashion. "The Last Song" is an extremely sensitive portrayal of the human degradation, and its impact lies in the author's conscious attempt not to deliberate beyond the necessary.

Thus on a cold December night in a remote village, an old storyteller gathers the young of the land around the leaping flames of a hearth and squats on the bare earth among them to pass on the story of that Black Sunday when a young and beautiful singer sang her last song even as one more Naga village began weeping for her ravaged and ruined children.

The stories are invariably like a scorpion's tale—round, sharp and matter-of-factly conclusive. Without trying to blind the reader about what happened next. So "The Curfew Man" ends with the two-liner: "A new curfew man would be in place by evening and the man with the two smashed knee-caps had already become history." Another kind of history is sought to be narrated (in fact, that's the constant metaphor of Temsula Ao's narrative style) in "The Pot Maker" which is not only a mother-daughter story which also reflects on the psyche of the entire Naga society but also about the resurrection of a dying art, and the triumph of will over ineptitude. The essence lies in:

"But if both mother and daughter were involved in turning out these pots, was it possible to differentiate between the two batches (between perfection and inexperience). Onula stood there for a long time as if trying to absorb a new phenomenon...A new pot maker was born."

"The Night" is a touching story about an unwed mother's dilemma, and how a moment of indiscretion can result in uncalled for agony. It again has Temsula Ao's trademark rounding off. It dwells on the wider issue of duality of nature in man-woman relationship.

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How a moment's indiscretion or indulgence binds a woman down while allowing the man to go scot-free. In narrating these stories while Temsula Ao presents a graphic picture of the Naga society, it also sensitively dwells on the strength and weaknesses of Naga women's character, and her position in a society grappling with tradition and modernity, between the rural and the urban and the related changes in social behaviour patterns.

A few of the stories in this collection try to capture the ambience of the traditional Naga way of life, which, even for our own youngsters today, is increasingly becoming irrelevant in the face of the 'progress' and 'development' which is only now catching up with the Naga people. The sudden displacement of the young from a placid existence in rural habitats to a world of conflict and confusion in urban settlements is also a fallout of recent Naga history and one that has left them disabled in more ways than one.

But sadly none of the ten narratives deals or seeks to portray this aspect effectively, or even directly. Neither "A Journey" nor "A New Chapter" really come any close to presenting that reality. They also draw and dwell on times long confined to history.

Temsula Ao has a casual, almost effortless way of telling stories, and simplicity is the hallmark of her narrative style.

Suresh Kohli

Our Contributors

Ajay, M.K.: Indian-English poet; has published one collection of poems titled *Facsimile of Belief*; his poems have appeared in *Orbis*, *The Little Magazine*, *Chandrabbhaga* and others. Email: ajaymk1@rediffmail.com

Amina Amin. Critic and book-reviewer. Add: C/4 Jasmine, Khanpur, Ahmedabad 380 001

Barua, Abani. Translates from Assamese to English; lives in Jerusalem, Israel.

Baruah, Manjeet. Translates from Assamese to English; has one translation work to his credit. Add: C/o Prof. Indira Goswami, D-19/29-31, Chhatra Marg, University of Delhi, Delhi 110 007.

Bhoomkar, Santosh M. (b.1950) Indian English poet and translator; presently working as Reader and Head of the Department of English and In-charge, Postgraduate Faculty of Arts, S.B. Arts and Commerce College, Aurangabad 431 001. Add: 10,

West Saraswati Colony, Aurangabad 431 001

Bihari, Pranav. Translates from Maithili to English. Add: C/o Dr. Deo Shankar Navin, Editor (Hindi), National Book Trust, A/5 Green Park, New Delhi 110 016.

Chatterjee, M.N.: Critic and reviewer. Add: 202 Jaijaiwanti, Asiatic Enclave, Vartak Nagar, Thane (W) 400 606, Maharashtra.

Cunniah, Bruno. A Senior Lecturer at the University of Mauritius, where he was Adjunct Professor at San Diego State University; has been published extensively on the subject of feminist studies/ gender studies in the literature of the Indian Ocean. Add: Department of French Studies, University of Mauritius, Reduit, Mauritius, Indian Ocean. Email: bcunniah@uom.ac.mu

Deb, Asoke (b.1969) Bengali poet from Tripura; have four collec-

tions of poems to his credit including *Monir Kachakachi* and *Chhaya Sangeet*; co-edited the famed poetry journal *Bangla Kavita* published from Agartala; a school teacher by profession. Add: Chhanban, P.O. Rajarbag, Udaipur (South Tripura) 799 120.

Dev, Amiya. Eminent scholar and critic in English and Bengali; one of the founders of the Comparative Literature Department of Jadavpur University, Kolkata; retired as the Vice-Chancellor of Vidyasagar University, West Bengal. Add: EE-108, Salt Lake, Flat No. 7, Kolkata 700 091.

Ejaz, Fee Seen. Urdu poet; Editor, *Mabnama Insha*, a monthly Urdu magazine. Add: Insha Publications, 25 B, Zakaria Street, Calcutta 700 073.

Garg, Mridula. An eminent Hindi writer; has to her credit six novels, eighty short stories, two plays and two collections of essays; three of her books have been translated into English and one into German. Add: F-421, Greater Kailash - II, Ground Floor, New Delhi 110 048.

Goswami, Manoj. Assamese fiction-writer; a journalist by profession; his important works include *Swadhinata*, collection of

short stories; recipient of Katha Award; at present working as Editor, *Dainik Jan Sadharan*, Dispur, Guwahati. 09864024225

Gupta, Ashes (b.1969) Teaches English at Tripura University, Tripura. Add: 'Ashirbaad', Ramnagar Road No. - 6, PO: Ramnagar, Agartala - 799 002, West Tripura.

Jeevakant (b.1936) Maithili poet and fiction-writer; has more than 11 published works *Takait Achi Chirai* (poetry), *Vastu* (short story), *Agniban* (novel) etc. to his credit; recipient of Vaidehi Puraskar. Add: Dyorh, Ghoghardiha, Madhubani 847 402, Bihar.

Jhabvala, Renana. 32, Shamnath Marg, Flat No. 5, Delhi 110 054.

Kamat, Paresh Narendra (b.1968) Konkani poet; has published two collections of poems so far - *Along* and *Garbhakhol*; winner of Konkani Bhasha Mandal Award and Goa Hindu Association" B.B. Borkar Memorial Award; a pharmacist by profession. Add: F-6, Parag Co-op. Housing Society, Phase 2, Shantinagar, Pnda 403 401, Goa

Khanna, Satti. Translates from Hindi and English; winner of the prestigious Crossword Award for

translation; Associate Professor at Duke University, Dept. of Asian & African Languages, Box 90414, 2101 Campus Drive, Durham NC 27708-0414, USA. Email: skhanna@duke.edu.

Kohli, Suresh (b.1947) Poet, literary critic and documentary film-maker. Has published four collections of poetry, one novel and edited several volumes of essays and short stories. Has translated extensively from Hindi, Urdu and Punjabi. Edited and published *The Indian Literary Review* from 1979 to 1990. Add: E-180, Greater Kailash Part II, New Delhi 110 048.

Kumar, Ashwani. Born in Bihar, studied in Patna and Delhi and acquired his Ph.D from University of Oklahoma, USA; currently, he teaches Political Science at Deshbandhu College, Delhi University; his book on "Peasants and Caste Violence in Bihar" is forthcoming this summer from Anthem Press (London). Add: I-61, RBI Officers' Colony, Poorvi Marg, Vasant Vihar, New Delhi 110057. Email: ashwanidu@yahoo.com

Kumar, Kamal. Writes poetry in Hindi and translates from Hindi to English; Associate Professor, Jesus & Mary College, Delhi

University, Chanakya Puri, New Delhi 110 021.

Mahapatra, Manas Ranjan. Oriya poet and translator; works as an Editor with the National Book Trust, A-5, Green Park, New Delhi 110 016.

Mahapatra, Sailabala. (b.1960). Oriya poet and short story writer; has four collections of poetry namely *Jeeban Vichitra Phula*, *Keta Rangara Samaya* etc.; recipient of Chalapat Award, Chandrabhaga Award etc.; Add: Seela Chinmay, Tikarpara, Indradyumna Chhak, Puri 752 002

Mehta, Tania. Indian English poet and critic; teaches at the Department of English, Punjabi University, Chandigarh. Add: C/o Ishan Mehta, C-726, New Friends Colony, New Delhi.

Mohapatra, Himanshu. Critic and translator; contributes articles on academic issues to *The Hindu*; has been a Visiting Professor to some European universities; presently teaching at the Department of English, Utkal University, Bhubaneswar 751 004, Orissa.

Mukherji, Samir. Add: 6-B, Lower Circular Road, Calcutta 700 017.

Nagdas, V. (b.1957) Renowned artist; has participated in several major art exhibitions in India and abroad; recipient of numerous awards including National Akademi Award 2000; at present working as Head of the Department of Graphics, I.K.S. University, Khairagarh. Add: Qtr. No. 3, University Teachers' Colony, Indira Kala Sangeet University, Khairagarh 491 881

Nigam, R.L. Wrote articles on politics for newspapers and magazines; had retired as Reader from the Department of English, D.A.V. College, Dehradun.

Nigam, Santvana (b.1933) Hindi fiction-writer; translates from Bengali to Hindi. Add: C/5, Press Enclave, New Delhi 110 017

Panda, Hrusikesh (b.1955) Oriya fiction-writer; has published seven novels, eight collections of short stories and four plays besides essays on contemporary issues; has also made eight short films, and composed the music for some of them; recipient of several awards including Sahitya Akademi Translation Prize and Best Playwright Award at All India Theatre Festival, Allahabad 2001. Add: VII C/10, Unit-I, Bhubaneswar.

Panda, Durga Prasad (b.1970): Writes poetry, reviews books and translates poetry both in Oriya and English; published variously in leading journals; recipient of *Indian Literature* Translation Prize. Add: J.M. Colony, P.O.b Budharaja, Sambalpur 768 004, Orissa.

Patil, Anuradha. Marathi poet; has several collections of poetry like *Diganta*, *Tareehi*, *Divasen Divas* etc. Add: "Abhijit" 119, Mahatma Gandhi Nagar, Station Road, Aurangabad 431 005

Rai, Alok. Eminent scholar and academic; Professor, Department of English University of Delhi. Add: 38/15 Probyn Road, Delhi University, Delhi 110 007. Email: alokr46@yahoo.co.uk

Raikar, Sacheen Pai. Translates from Konkani to English; contributed to *Ferry Crossings*, anthology of Goan short stories; winner of Katha Award; Member, Goa Writers' Group. Add: Adavika Smruti, H.No.103, N.T. Pednecar Road, Mala-Fontainhas, Panaji, Goa 403 001. Email: sachemu@sancharnet.in

Ray, Bishnupada. Working as Senior Lecturer, Department of English, North Bengal University, P.O. N.B.U. Campus, Raja

Rammohunpur, Dist. Darjeeling
734 013, West Bengal.

Shah, C.S. Marathi poet. Add:
35, Nutan Colony, Aurangabad
431 001

Shah, Ramesh Chandra (b.1937)
Well-known Hindi short-story
writer, novelist, poet and critic;
has more than 38 published works
to his credit; recipient of Shikhar
Samman from Govt. of M.P.,
Bharatiya Bhasha Parishad Award,
Calcutta etc. Retired Professor of
English and Director, Nirala
Srijanpeeth. Add: M-4,
Niralanagar, Bhadbhada Road,
Bhopal 462 003

Shiva Prakash, H.S. (b.1954)
Kannada poet and playwright;
winner of Sangeet Natak Akademi
Award, Karnataka Sahitya
Akademi Award etc.; translates
from Kannada into English; was
formerly Editor, *Indian Literature*;
currently working as Associate
Professor, School of Arts and
Aesthetics, Jawaharlal Nehru
University, New Delhi 110 067.

Shukla, Vinod Kumar (b.1937)
Hindi poet and fiction-writer; has
published more than 20 works,
which include *Lagbhag Jai Hind*,
Vab Admi Chala Gaya Naya Garam
Kot Pahankar "Vichar Ki Tarah (po-
etry), *Naunkar Ki Kamiz*, *Khilega To*

Dekhenge, (novels), *Ped Par Kamra*,
Mahavidyalay (short stories) etc.;
recipient of Srijan Bharati
Samman, Raghuveer Sahai Smriti
Puraskar, Dayavati Modi Kavi
Shekhar Saman, Crossword
Award, Sahitya Akademi Award
for his novel *Deewar Mein Ek Khirki*
Rabti Thi, etc. Add: C-217,
Shailendra Nagar, Raipur 492 001,
M.P.

Stephen, S. Jeyaseela (b.1958)
Scholar and writer; some of his
significant works include *The Coro-
mandel Coast and its Hinterland: Economy,
Society and Political System, 1500-1600*,
*Portuguese in the Tamil Coast: Historical
Exploration in Commerce and Culture*
etc.; recipient of Best Book Prize
of the Government of Tamilnadu,
and was Charge d' Recherche at
the Ecole Francaise d' Extreme-
Orient, Paris/ Pondicherry; at
present working as Professor of
Maritime History and Coordina-
tor of the UGC-Special Assistance
Programme at the Department
of History in Visva Bharati,
Santiniketan 731 235, West Ben-
gal. Email: stephenjey@yahoo.
co.in

Talapatra, Subhasis (b.1962) Fic-
tionist, critic and painter; an ad-
vocate by profession. Add: Senior
Advocate, High Court, Bar Asso-
ciation, Agartala - 799 001,
Tripura.

Our Contributors / 199

Verma, Anoop (b.1966) Indian English short-story writer and novelist; has one novel, *A Thread of Life*, to his credit. Add: A 67/1, DDA (SFS) Flat, Saket, New Delhi 110 017.

Vishwanathan, S. Add: 8, Parthasarathipuram Extension,

North T. Nagar, Chennai 600 0

Zide, Arlene (b.1940) Well-known Hindi poet, linguist and translator; her poems and translations have appeared in national and international magazines. Add: 1357-E, Madison Park, Chicago, Illinois 60615, U.S.A.

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